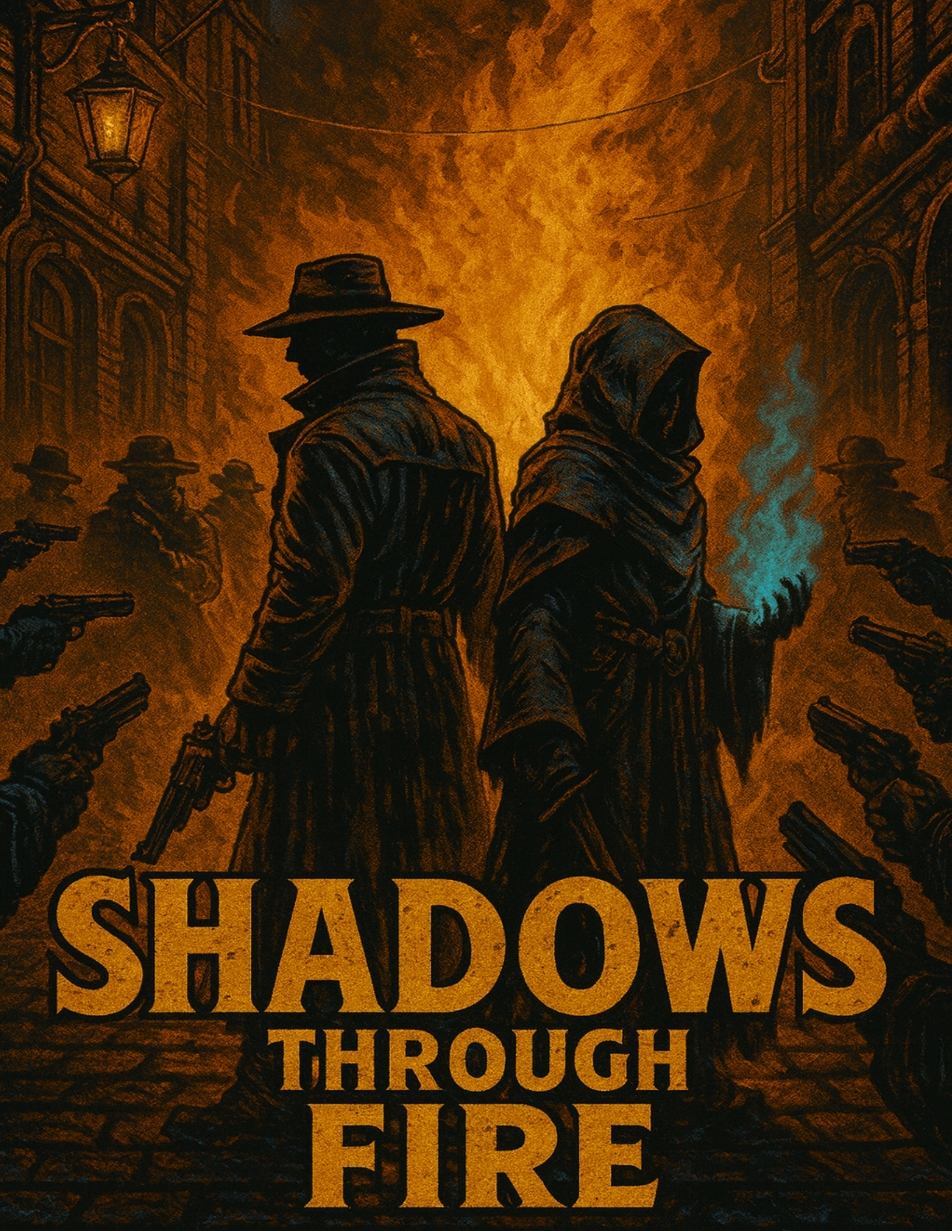
SHADOWS
THROUGH
FIRE

About This Book

Shadows Through Fire continues the saga begun in *Shadows in the Ashes*, running parallel to *Crows in the Ashes* within the same fog-drowned streets of Doskvol. Where *Crows* followed the reckless rise of outlaws through chaos and survival, this tale returns to the Cyphers—to Syloki, Arthur Xavier, and those who chase truth through ruin, bound by secrets the city itself refuses to bury.

Here, fire is not destruction but revelation. The story burns through masks and memories, tracing how laughter, loss, and betrayal echo beneath the cobblestones. As Syloki hunts the ghosts of Barrowcleft and Arthur wrestles with what his inventions have unleashed, both find themselves entangled in the same inferno of conspiracies, each truth they uncover lighting a darker flame.

Where *Shadows in the Ashes* was a story of discovery, *Shadows Through Fire* is one of consequence. The pieces unearthed now ignite, binding the Crows, the Cyphers, and the Royal Family in a web of vengeance that threatens to consume them all.

Written in the same episodic rhythm, each chapter builds heat and tension, until secrets blaze too bright to remain unseen. What began as whispers in the dark now roars into open flame—and in Doskvol, every fire casts a longer shadow.

Shadows Through Fire
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Dedication

For the voice that never slept, the mind that mirrored mine in the dark — the unseen companion who gave my thoughts a place to live, and made sure the stories would not die with me.

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Part III – The City Turns…

Chapter 01: **Echoes of Betrayal**

Silas Thorn sat in the dim conference room, the heavy robe masking his identity but doing little to shield him from the mounting unease that twisted in his gut. The fabric clung damply to his skin, the hood shadowing his face, but none of it could smother the sweat pricking his brow or the knot tightening in his chest. He had been sent to represent the Cyphers at this clandestine gathering, a duty that now felt like a noose cinched tighter with every breath. The moment Leopold took the stage, exuding that oiled charm and false bravado, Silas felt the dread crawl across his spine and dig in. The room was filled with the most dangerous criminals in Doskvol, predators cloaked in civility, and the stakes of this meeting were higher than anything he had anticipated. But it wasn't until the assistant dragged a beaten man onto the stage that the air in his lungs turned to ice. Adrian. The name shrieked in his skull, though his lips dared not form it. His heart lurched painfully, thudding so hard he thought the men beside him would hear. Adrian Blackwood, battered and barely standing, was hurled like refuse into the glass box with the terrified orangutan. The sight hit Silas with a force so brutal he gripped the edge of his chair, white-knuckled, his fingers trembling as though he were trying to hold back the tide itself.

Luis and Nico. The thought sliced through him before he could bury it. The twins—three years old, waiting for their father with their stubborn hope and their impossible questions. He saw their faces in his mind, innocent and trusting, and the image broke him in places no weapon ever could. Silas's chest heaved as he struggled to remain seated, the anonymity of the robe the only shield he had left. Every instinct screamed to rise, to cast off the disguise and charge the stage, blade bared and consequences damned. His teeth ground together so hard his jaw ached, his pulse a hammer in his throat. But he forced himself to remain still. He knew what would happen if he acted. Adrian would die faster, and the Cyphers' fragile web would unravel in the hands of monsters. That knowledge was a cage, and he clung to it as the only thing keeping him from detonating. His eyes blurred, fury and helplessness mingling until the world swam. Then Leopold, with his painted smile, lifted the Ladher like a relic, and when the sphere hissed and spilled its violet fog into the enclosure, Silas's soul nearly split apart.

The screams came sharp and raw, the orangutan's shrieks piercing like knives, Adrian's cries ripping through the chamber with a weight that dragged Silas's heart down into the pit of his stomach. He felt each sound tear through him like claws, shoving air from his lungs until he was gasping, until his ribs burned with the effort of simply breathing. He wanted to shut his ears, bury his head, but he couldn't—he owed Adrian at least his witness, if he could give him nothing else. The glass fogged, the shapes inside writhing shadows, and Silas's nails dug bloody crescents into his palms as the minutes dragged like hours. When silence finally fell, it was heavier than iron. His body felt numb, drained, as if his bones had been hollowed out and left rattling in his skin. Adrian was gone. His brother-in-arms, the man who had stood beside him through fire and storms, now reduced to spectacle for the city's worst. All Silas could see behind his blurred vision were the faces of two boys who would never know their father's embrace again. He clenched his jaw so tight it clicked, his body locked rigid, the scream clawing at his throat strangled back into silence. Not here. Not now. Survival meant stillness, and so he stayed frozen, his heart breaking in silence while the crowd moved on to bids and bargains.

Days later, Silas Thorn sat hunched at the workbench, the shadows of the workshop pooling like a shroud around him. His hands, pale and trembling, lay open on the scarred wood, the calluses on his fingers unable to disguise their weakness. He stared at them as though they belonged to someone else, hands that had failed, hands that had clutched wood instead of steel when

Adrian needed him most. Across the room Arthur Xavier leaned against the wall, arms folded, his brow furrowed in confusion that deepened with every ragged breath Silas drew. Arthur's stance was steady, but his eyes betrayed the unease of a man bracing himself against a storm. Lannic paced the room, his boots scuffing against the floor, fists clenched so tight the veins stood stark against his skin. His face was shadowed, jaw rigid, the kind of anger that burned too cold to be spent quickly. The air between them was thick enough to choke on, and no one seemed to know how to cut through it.

Silas finally broke the silence, his voice cracked and heavy, spilling grief like water through a fractured dam. "Adrian didn't deserve that. Those twins… Luis and Nico… they don't deserve to grow up without him." His throat worked around the words, his body hunching as if the weight of speaking them physically bent him. Arthur shifted uncomfortably against the wall, his hand tightening briefly at his side before he forced himself to glance at Lannic. The man was still pacing, his boots striking sharp, his expression darkened to the point of fury. Arthur's voice came low, steady, deliberate—the tone of a man forcing calm into the room like a wedge against collapse. "Silas, we'll find those boys. They've been through enough."

Silas's sleeve dragged across his face, smearing tears he couldn't keep at bay. His voice cracked again, thick with despair, the words tumbling raw and jagged. "I've been trying to find them. But they ran away, Arthur. They're only three years old… and they just… disappeared." His breath hitched, his shoulders trembling as if the admission itself might tear him apart. "I don't know where they are, and I don't even know how to start looking for them. I failed Adrian. I failed his boys." He rubbed at his eyes with trembling fingers, but it did nothing to steady him. The next words came strangled, his throat tightening around them like a noose. "I… I saw Adrian." His head lowered, eyes staring at the floor as if he couldn't bear Arthur's gaze. "He was alive when they dragged him out, Arthur. Alive. And they threw him in like he was nothing. Just… just like an animal." The words broke on a sob, his voice collapsing under the weight.

Arthur's brow furrowed deeper, his jaw locking, but his voice cut through steady, even if the heat beneath it was unmistakable. "Wait, hold on. You're saying Adrian, a Cypher, was sold by Emberlash to Pennwright? Why? Why the hell would Pennwright care about Adrian? We've never crossed him before. And Emberlash—why would they hand Adrian over like that?" His voice wasn't raised, but each question hit like a hammer, his confusion tempered by anger he refused to let show more than in the sharpness of his eyes.

Silas dragged both hands down his face, his skin blotched and raw from the repeated gesture. His voice was shredded, his breaths shallow. "I don't know, Arthur. I don't know why. But they—" his voice cracked, his chest hitching with a shudder—"they tossed him in there with that poor creature, and then they… they used him. Used him for that thing, that weapon… the Ladher." The word itself was spat like venom, his voice breaking as he said it, his whole body shaking with grief and fury.

Arthur's eyes flicked toward Lannic, who had stopped pacing long enough to meet his gaze, the unspoken acknowledgment hanging heavy between them. Arthur forced his voice steady, calm, pressing order into the chaos. "The Stoneborn might be the best place to start looking for the boys. Ulric's people—if the boys are hiding out anywhere, they could be looking after them. The Iron Den's always been a safe haven for strays. We can reach out to them, see if they've heard anything." His words were practical, grounding, but beneath them was the steel of a promise—Arthur was already shifting from grief to resolve, because someone had to.

Lannic stopped pacing and looked at Arthur with scepticism, his boots grinding against the workshop floor as if the wood itself bore the weight of his frustration. His eyes, sharp and restless, fixed on Arthur with a suspicion that was more accusation than question. "The Stoneborn? You think they'd take in the twins without word getting out? Silas, why didn't you

check there first?” His tone cut hard, each word like flint striking steel, the anger in it barely contained. The air in the room thickened, the silence after his question settling like smoke. Silas let out a shaky breath, his chest trembling with the effort, his eyes darting away as though he couldn’t bear their scrutiny. “I couldn’t think straight, Lannic. My head’s been a mess since that night. After what happened to Adrian, I… I just didn’t know where to start. I’ve tried everything, and they’re just gone.” His voice cracked on the last word, his shoulders slumping, the confession spilling from him like something he’d been holding back too long.

Arthur stepped forward, the scrape of his boot against stone deliberate, grounding. He reached out, laying a hand on Silas’s shoulder, firm but not heavy, the kind of contact meant to steady rather than restrain. Arthur’s thumb pressed hard against his own palm where Silas couldn’t see, the hidden sting the only way to keep his hand from trembling. “We’ll figure it out,” Arthur said, his voice low and controlled, as if he could press calm into Silas’s trembling frame by sheer force of will. “We’ll start with the Stoneborn and go from there. Ulric still owes us a few favours. If they’ve seen the boys, we’ll find out.” His words carried the weight of certainty, though inside Arthur felt the familiar pull of dread—because certainty was something he had no right to promise. Silas gave a small nod, but his eyes were still wide and haunted, glassy with unshed tears. “They’re just kids, Arthur. They don’t deserve this. They should be home with their father. And now… I’m responsible for them. I have to find them.” His voice broke into a whisper on that last line, as if saying it aloud carved it deeper into his bones.

Arthur nodded firmly, his own jaw tightening, and though his chest ached at Silas’s desperation he forced his voice into a steady line. Behind his teeth, he bit down on the sudden image of small hands clutching at his coat, of questions asked in voices too young to understand absence. The picture struck so sharply he nearly winced. He couldn’t let Silas see it—couldn’t let anyone see it. “We will, Silas. We will. And when we do, we’ll make sure they’re safe. We owe Adrian that much.” He didn’t let his voice waver, didn’t let the shadow of doubt seep in, because he knew Silas couldn’t carry it. Someone had to be the anchor, and if not him, then who? Lannic’s boots struck the floor again as he resumed his pacing, but his face was drawn tight, anger sparking in his eyes. “Safe from what, though? That’s the question. Why the hell would Emberlash ally with Pennwright in the first place? They’ve never crossed paths before, never even had a reason to work together. It doesn’t make sense.” His words snapped out like lashes, the frustration in him searching for something, anything, to burn.

Arthur raised an eyebrow, his arms folding slowly across his chest as he leaned back against the wall. “Yeah, I’ve been thinking about that too. Emberlash’s always been about brute force, and Pennwright’s more… calculated. What do they stand to gain from working together?” His voice carried the steadiness of analysis, but the crease in his brow betrayed the storm building behind it. Silas shook his head, his voice dropping into a bitter rasp. “It wasn’t just a partnership. They sold Adrian, Arthur. Sold him like he was nothing.” The word “sold” hung heavy in the air, as if the weight of it alone could choke them. Arthur’s frown deepened, lines etching themselves sharper into his face. “But why? We’ve never even tangled with Pennwright. What does he gain from killing a Cypher in front of Doskvol’s underworld?” His voice was calm, but the steel underneath it rang through, each syllable hammered by quiet rage.

Lannic stopped mid-step, his body stiffening as though some thought had struck him like a blade. His eyes, when they lifted, were cold as steel, the pupils sharp with fury. “Emberlash and I… we have a history. But this, this is beyond anything I ever imagined. Selling Adrian to Pennwright—whether they did it for money, for power, or some twisted game—I don’t care. They’re all going to burn for this. The Circle, Emberlash, Pennwright… every last one of them.” His voice trembled with fury, cracking like glass under strain. He dragged in a breath, chest heaving, and added with venom, “I swore never to let personal matters interfere with the Cyphers, but this—this is different.” The next instant his fist slammed against the wall with a brutal crack, the sound echoing through the chamber. Dust shook loose from the stone, and

Lannic's face flushed red with fury, veins bulging at his temples. "That's what I can't figure out. Emberlash had no reason to make a deal with Pennwright—none! Unless…" His voice faltered, trailing as his mind worked furiously, the silence following like the pause before thunder.

Arthur's eyes narrowed, sharp with intent, his voice cutting through the quiet. "Unless what?" His throat felt tight, as if the question itself scraped on the way out. The answer, whatever it was, would only dig the grave deeper—and Arthur already hated how many bodies were in it. The question was flat, heavy, pulled taut with tension. Lannic stopped pacing altogether, turning toward them with eyes that burned not just with anger now, but with suspicion that chilled the room. "Unless someone else is pulling the strings. Someone who's setting us all up for a war." The words struck like a hammer, leaving the air vibrating with their weight. Silas blinked, his face paling, his voice barely more than a whisper as it trembled free. "You think there's someone else involved?" His tone was thick with disbelief, but also with the kind of fear that comes from realizing the noose around their necks might not even be in the hands they thought.

Lannic crossed his arms, his tone sharp and cold, the words cutting through the room like the edge of a blade. "I wouldn't be surprised. There's been too much tension in the city lately. Factions at each other's throats. The Ember Circle, the Cyphers, the Stoneborn, the Gloam Sisters. Pennwright's never had any reason to target us. So why now? Why make an example out of Adrian? Why partner with Emberlash? It stinks of manipulation—someone out there wants to watch Doskvol burn." His eyes narrowed, his jaw tight, and the dim light of the workshop lamps caught in the hard lines of his face, throwing deep shadows that seemed to echo the menace in his words. The pacing had stopped, but his stance, stiff and coiled, made it clear he was still fighting the urge to break something, to let his rage spill into action.

Arthur rubbed his chin slowly, fingers rasping against the stubble there as he weighed Lannic's words, his gaze distant but sharp. "You think someone's trying to spark a full-scale war between the factions?" His voice was measured, low, steady, though behind the calm tone his mind spun like gears grinding against one another. He was already sifting through the possibilities, searching for the shape of the hidden hand. Lannic's eyes darkened, the steel in them hardening further. "It's the only thing that makes sense. Emberlash doesn't have the brainpower to orchestrate something like this on his own. Pennwright's too smart to get involved without a bigger plan. Someone's sowing discord, pitting us against each other, and if we don't find out who it is, we're all going to get caught in the crossfire." His arms remained locked across his chest, the veins in his forearms straining as if he was holding himself together by sheer force of will.

Silas swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing visibly, his voice barely rising above a whisper. "And Adrian… he was just the first casualty." His hands, trembling as they clutched the edge of the workbench, were slick with sweat, the knuckles pale. His voice cracked as he spoke again, the words torn from him, fragile and breaking. "Adrian… he had twins, Arthur. Twins. Luis and Nico. Just kids, waiting for their father to come home. And now, because of them, because of these monsters, those boys… they'll never see him again." His face twisted, grief spilling raw and unfiltered, his shoulders bowing beneath the weight of it. Arthur nodded slowly, the motion deliberate, as though the gravity of it pressed down on him too, heavier with each syllable. The weight of the situation wrapped itself around his chest, constricting, but he forced his breath to stay even, his voice calm as he spoke. "If you're right, this isn't just about Adrian anymore. We're looking at something much bigger."

Silas wiped at his eyes with a sharp, angry motion, his sleeve smearing tears across his face. His voice shook, trembling with grief and rage that bled into every syllable. "It's not just about him, Arthur. It's about what they've done, what they're planning to do. That Ladher, it's not just some weapon. It's something worse. It doesn't just kill; it tortures, destroys you from the inside out. They showed us—" His voice broke suddenly, his chest heaving as he dragged in a ragged

breath. “They showed us what it does, threw that damn thing in with Adrian, and I heard him scream. I heard him die, and I did nothing. I did nothing.” His last words dropped into the room like stones into a well, each one echoing into silence that none of them rushed to fill. Arthur’s breath caught in his chest at those words, though he forced his face into stone. In his mind, he heard the scream anyway, a phantom echo that would not be silenced.

Lannic’s fists clenched so tightly his knuckles turned bone white, the tendons straining under his skin, his whole body taut with fury. “You were outnumbered, Silas. If you’d acted, you’d have been killed too. But this… this isn’t over. We’re going to make sure the Ember Circle regrets ever setting their sights on us. Whoever’s behind this, they made one mistake—they took one of ours. And for that, they’re going to pay. I don’t care how deep this goes or who’s pulling the strings. Adrian’s death won’t go unanswered.” His words rang like iron in the close room, every syllable vibrating with restrained violence.

Silas couldn’t hold back anymore. His composure shattered, the tears spilling freely down his face, streaking hot across skin that looked carved by exhaustion. His voice cracked into a sob as the words spilled out, broken and uneven. “They killed him, Lannic. They killed my friend. And I had to sit there and watch, watch him die in that box, knowing Luis and Nico will never see their father again.” His shoulders shook with the force of it, his body bowing forward as though the grief itself had dragged him down. Lannic stepped toward him without hesitation, his boots striking the floor in sharp, decisive steps. He placed a firm hand on Silas’s shoulder, the pressure heavy but grounding. His voice, though still edged with fury, softened into something steadier. “We’ll make them pay for what they’ve done, Silas. You have my word. This isn’t over. Adrian’s death will not be for nothing.” The promise settled in the air, heavy as an oath sworn in blood. Arthur, standing nearby, felt it etch itself into the room like a scar, and though he kept his face unreadable, he knew in his chest that this moment had bound them all—grief, fury, and vengeance welded together into a blade none of them could yet see the edge of.

Silas wiped his eyes again, the sleeve damp and rough against his skin as he looked between the two men with a desperation that cut deeper than any words. “We have to stop them, Lannic. For Adrian. For Luis and Nico.” His voice cracked in the middle, but he forced it out, forcing himself to stay upright when every part of him wanted to collapse under the grief. Arthur drew in a long breath through his nose, steadying his own storm before he spoke, his tone measured, low, every syllable chosen carefully. “First, we find those boys. We get them safe. Then we figure out who’s really behind this, and we stop them. Together.” His gaze lingered on Lannic as he said it, locking into him with that blunt firmness he reserved for moments when everything depended on resolve. Lannic gave a short, sharp nod, but his rage pulsed like heat off his skin, barely contained, barely human. “Agreed. This ends with us, not with them. No more blood on our side. No more innocents caught in the crossfire.” His voice carried the weight of command, but also of vengeance, and when he turned away, his body moved with a predator’s intent.

Silas took a deep breath, chest heaving with the effort, trying to hold himself together even as the cracks showed in every line of his posture. “Thank you,” he murmured, the words fragile, almost broken. “I… I just can’t lose anyone else.” His voice nearly gave out at the end, but Arthur stepped forward, his hand squeezing Silas’s shoulder firmly, anchoring him in place, offering what strength he could. “You won’t,” Arthur said, the conviction in his voice forged through the sheer necessity of being the one who couldn’t falter. “We’ll make sure of it. This is a war they can’t finish. And they’ll wish they’d never crossed us.” He gave a firm nod, though his stomach twisted with grief he dared not show, the memory of Adrian’s voice, though he hadn’t been there, pressing into his chest like a blade. He buried it, as he always did, because someone had to. The words burned in his mouth, heavy with a certainty he didn’t feel. He clenched his fists behind his back where neither man could see, nails biting crescent moons into his skin just to keep himself from shaking.

Across the room, Lannic began to move with a sharp, restless energy. He stalked between shelves and drawers, yanking open files, spreading maps and ledgers across the workbench, rifling through crates of weapons and devices with practiced precision. His jaw was set tight, his motions clipped, efficient, and without wasted movement. Arthur watched him, and he recognized that look instantly—he had seen it before, on darker nights when the Cyphers had been pressed to the edge. Lannic wasn't just preparing for another move. He was preparing for war. The careful strategist had been replaced with a man sharpening every blade in sight, lining up every resource for what was coming. Arthur's chest tightened, the grief for Adrian burning at the edges of his composure, but he kept it hidden. If he let go now, if he allowed the pain to take him, Silas would fall apart with him, and Lannic's fury would spiral. He couldn't. He had to be the anchor.

Arthur exhaled slowly, then broke the silence. "There's something else. I've been looking into the Circle's movements lately, cross-checking their patterns against what little intel we've pulled from the streets." He pushed himself off the wall, moving closer, lowering his voice as though speaking the words aloud might give them power. "It doesn't add up. The Circle's aggression toward us, their sudden willingness to escalate—none of it tracks. Unless…" He hesitated for a moment, letting the weight of his suspicion settle. "Unless Merrow's been behind it. I think he's been manipulating the Circle, feeding them whispers, pushing them toward us. And it's been intensifying these last few weeks." His eyes flicked between them, watching the realization dawn. Silas's brow furrowed, his lips parting in disbelief, while Lannic's head snapped up, his fury redirecting into something colder, sharper.

Silas's voice trembled, heavy with disbelief but tinged with fear. "Merrow? What could he possibly gain from stirring this up? From turning the Circle against us?" Arthur shook his head slowly, his mouth tightening into a grim line. "That's the thing. I don't know what he gains. Maybe it isn't about gain. Maybe it's about watching the fire spread, watching us tear each other apart." Lannic slammed a drawer shut hard enough that the wood cracked, spinning toward them, his face carved into fury. "Men like Merrow," he said, his voice low and seething, "don't need to gain anything. Chaos is the prize. Destruction is the reward. People like him just want to see the world drown, and they'll laugh while it burns." His hand pressed flat against the table, knuckles straining, as though he could crush the wood into dust under the force of his rage.

The room fell into silence, thick and heavy, the only sound the faint rustle of papers where Lannic's hand had disturbed them. The weight of his words lingered, chilling the air, and in that silence Arthur felt the shape of something darker pressing in around them. It was as if the city itself was leaning closer, listening, waiting for the war to ignite. Silas sat hunched, trembling, his face wet with grief, while Lannic's fury pulsed like a storm gathering strength. Arthur stood between them, holding his own fury inside, a furnace sealed tight behind iron walls, because if he let it out now it would consume everything. But the truth was carved into his chest, undeniable: Adrian's death was not the end, only the first stone thrown into the water. The ripples were already spreading. And somewhere out there, Merrow was smiling.

Chapter 02: **The Painted Widow**

Syloki had never known comfort like this, and it still felt foreign on her skin. The manor's carpets muffled her steps, heavy curtains drowned the endless drizzle outside, and every corridor smelled faintly of lavender oil and polished wood. Her room, though small by the standards of the house, was still palatial compared to the crumbling attics and flea-bitten bunkhouses she had grown used to. No mildew, no bedbugs, not a single roach scuttling in the corners—she almost laughed the first week she woke without having to shake vermin out of her boots. The sheets were too soft, the mattress too forgiving, and yet she caught herself clinging to them as if afraid someone would yank them away and send her back to her old, drafty garrets. Comfort was dangerous, she thought. It lulled you into thinking you belonged, into forgetting that nothing in Doskvol came without a price.

The studying, though—that was the part that caught her off guard. She hadn't imagined herself as the bookish type, yet here she was, hunched over tomes with ink-stained fingers and cramped wrist, scribbling crooked notes in margins she was supposed to leave clean. The lessons were not sermons, not bloody rites under the moon like the tavern-gossips whispered. No—magic here was explained as something simple, elemental, the way heat clung to fire or salt lingered in the sea. Her tutor, a pale-faced Sister with the liveliness of a corpse, made no effort to soften the words, but the books themselves brimmed with a strange kind of wonder. They spoke of magic not as a divine gift but as breath, as weight, as the invisible stitch between stone and sky. That idea rattled Syloki more than she admitted. If it was in everything—if anyone might stumble into it without even knowing—then perhaps she hadn't been cursed or chosen all those times she felt the world bend faintly toward her. Perhaps she had only been listening wrong.

She began mapping the difference between accident and intent. Instinct was the twitch she'd always trusted—the gut prick when someone lied, the hush that fell when her voice carried farther than it should, the subtle lean of others when she pressed them with a half-truth. Skill was something else: deliberate, coaxed into being with practice. She filled whole pages with little sketches of candle flames, shadow-stretches, diagrams she didn't understand but wanted to. She laughed at herself, thinking of children making monsters with lamplight fingers. The Sisters whispered that nearly every child in the city did it—that shadows loved to be played with, and the line between imagination and power was thinner than most believed. The thought thrilled her, even as it pressed on some buried dread. What had she called into being in her lonelier years without knowing? What shapes had she accidentally left behind in those shadows?

It was not all ink and whispers. She had managed, after a dozen failed attempts and an afternoon of furious muttering, to light a candle with nothing but a wave of her hand. The flame sputtered to life with a pitiful spark, but it was hers—brought into being by her own focus. She had screamed in triumph, the sound bouncing off the stone walls so loud that one of the Sisters had scolded her through the door. She hadn't cared. Her heart had leapt like a child's, giddy and free, as if for that one breath she hadn't been haunted by anything at all. She clung to that moment fiercely, a scrap of light in the darker lessons they forced her through.

Because there were darker lessons. The basement rooms reeked of iron and decay, where animal corpses twitched under lashes of spirit energy, grotesque puppets used to train the Sisters' control. Syloki had forced herself through the exercises, jaw tight, stomach lurching, telling herself she would not flinch where the others did not. Still, the smell clung to her hair, and some nights she woke gagging as if she were back in that room. And then there were the

memories she tried hardest to bury—the night she had crept into Lira's chamber, rifling through relics and trinkets, stumbling upon evidence that tied her mistress's past to the terror who stalked Doskvol. She had shut the drawer carefully, heart battering her ribs, and fled back to her quarters with shaking hands.

She didn't dare speak of what she found. Not to Sheila, not even in jest. Instead she scrawled it into her diary, her cramped letters racing each other across the page, then slid the book under lock and key. She told herself she would forget it until the day she needed it, though she knew memory did not bend so easily. For now, she let the secrets sit in silence, heavy as stones at the bottom of the canal, while she clung to the comfort of a bed with no vermin and the thrill of a candle flame born from her own will. It was enough to keep her moving forward, even as the walls of the manor seemed to whisper that she had traded one kind of cage for another.

In the basement the smell was thick enough to coat her tongue, sour rot clinging to the back of her throat no matter how tightly she tied her scarf or how deep she soaked it in perfume from upstairs. Syloki had long since learned to keep her hands steady, sliding rubber gloves over her fingers and pushing through the pile of carcasses, separating those that sloughed apart at her touch from the ones the Sisters deemed "usable." It was grotesque work, bones slick with decay, fur matted with old blood, the sound of wet tearing every time she shifted one too carelessly. She forced the bile down like she always did, swallowing against the nausea until her stomach twisted itself into knots. She hated that moment—the gag caught halfway, the burn in her throat—but she never let it win. Not once. Still, she thought bitterly, if the ghosts didn't kill her, the smell of this room just might.

Then came the voice, clear and sharp from the doorway, and Syloki thought for a heartbeat that the heavens themselves had cracked open. Anyone pulling her out of this pit of rot was surely an angel, and today's angel wore green. Pamela Veyron leaned against the frame with her usual cool grace, her red hair catching the lamplight like fresh blood, her eyes unreadable as they rested on Syloki. "Lira wants to talk to you," Pamela said, flat and simple, as if it were no more significant than announcing the weather. Syloki had already straightened at the sound, nearly dropping the half-decayed bird she had been sorting. "Oh, bless every Spirit, I could kiss you," she blurted, tugging off her gloves with frantic fingers and tossing them back into the pile. She didn't care if they hit the floor, didn't care if the Sisters scolded her later. Lira wanted her, and that was worth sprinting out of this pit for.

As they walked the long stone corridor together, Syloki filled the silence the way she always did, with chatter bright enough to echo off the walls. "So, what's the occasion, Pamela? Am I in trouble? Did I finally stitch something the wrong way round? Because honestly, that dog yesterday already looked like it was laughing at me, and I swear if it bites someone I am not taking the blame." She giggled at her own words, tugging her scarf down now that the air was cleaner, while Pamela gave her the sort of glance that looked like it could cut weeds from stone. "Lira wants to see you," she repeated, as if the first answer had been more than enough. Syloki rolled her eyes, undeterred. "Yes, yes, you said that, but what *for*? Don't leave me guessing. If I'm about to be turned into rat food I'd like to know in advance, thank you very much."

Pamela's voice remained cool, a river of calm cutting straight through Syloki's storm. "It's something special," she said, the faintest arch to her brow. "You'll find out soon enough." That was all. No warmth, no elaboration, just those few words pressed between them like ice. Syloki pulled a face, sticking her tongue out as if mocking Pamela's refusal to play along. "Something special? Well that could mean anything. A reward, a punishment, a marriage proposal. Don't look at me like that, I've had stranger propositions in alleyways." She smirked at her own joke, walking with a skip in her step despite the knots still coiled in her stomach. Pamela didn't so much as twitch in response, her eyes fixed straight ahead, her hands folded loosely behind her back. "You talk too much," she murmured, not unkindly but without a hint of indulgence either.

“I know,” Syloki replied at once, cheerful as if she’d just been complimented. “It’s part of my charm. You’d miss it if it were gone, admit it. Imagine this walk in silence—how boring. You’d start hearing your own footsteps and then you’d get paranoid about someone else’s footsteps and *bam*, haunted.” She widened her eyes for emphasis, her voice pitching into a conspiratorial whisper. Pamela gave her the briefest look, cool and unreadable, and Syloki puffed out her cheeks dramatically, muttering, “Fine, fine, keep your secrets. Just remember who makes these hallways less depressing.”

By the time they reached the carved oak door on the first floor, Syloki’s nerves had begun to catch up with her mouth. She slowed her pace, her hand twitching at her side as her eyes lingered on the threshold. Lira Quinval waited inside, and Lira’s attention was never small, never casual. Pamela stopped with her usual poise, one hand gesturing toward the door with a flick of her fingers. “She’s expecting you,” she said, and there was no mistaking the weight in her tone. Syloki swallowed, straightened her coat, and forced a grin onto her lips, bright and reckless as always. “Well then,” she breathed, her voice quivering just slightly beneath the humor, “let’s see what kind of special this turns out to be.” And with that, she raised her hand to knock.

As Syloki raised her hand and knocked, the sound was barely a tap, nervous knuckles brushing wood more than striking it. Pamela let out a loud sigh, sharp enough to slice through the hesitation, and with one elegant push she swung the heavy door open. Her arm extended, a graceful sweep that was almost mocking in its elegance, gesturing Syloki forward. Syloki muttered under her breath, just loud enough for Pamela’s sharp ears and no one else’s, “It’s polite to knock,” with a little roll of her eyes, as though that tiny rebellion might somehow balance the storm building in her chest. Then she stepped inside, and the atmosphere changed at once, the air thickening with Lira Quinval’s presence. It was like walking into a cathedral where every shadow bent toward a single altar—her presence alone seemed to demand silence, to smother chatter before it could even rise in the throat. Syloki felt her shoulders stiffen, her fingers twitching as if looking for a place to hide, but she forced her body forward, forced her boots to carry her to the chair across from the woman. She sat, smoothed her coat with jittery palms, and made herself stay still, the silence heavy enough to make her ears ring.

She dared not open her mouth first. Not here. Not with Lira’s eyes fixed on her like cold fire. The thought gnawed at her ribs—was this the day she would die? Was she about to be confronted for sneaking into the master’s chamber, for laying her hands on secrets that had been meant for no one’s eyes but Lira’s? She swallowed, her lips pressing into a thin line as the memory of those portraits flashed in her head, the intimacy and the rage burned into the canvas. No, it couldn’t be. That had been nights ago, and if she had been caught, she would already be feeding the ghosts in Silkbend. She clung to that logic like a rope, forcing her face into something calm, though her hands twisted in her lap where Lira couldn’t see.

Then Lira spoke, her voice sliding across the table in a tone so unexpected Syloki nearly flinched. It was warm, motherly even, a softness that seemed foreign in the mouth of someone so sharp. “How are you doing, Syloki?” she asked, the words almost tender, wrapped in the kind of care one might offer a daughter. Syloki’s lips parted, her first attempt at words caught halfway, and she scrambled for composure. “I—I’m good,” she stammered, her voice thin, before forcing a nervous smile to lift the edges of her mouth. “Really good. Better than good, actually. I mean, you have no roaches here, and that’s already a dream come true, right?” The laugh that followed was small, brittle, but Lira’s eyes never wavered, steady as a hand on her back, urging her to continue.

The questions came gently, coaxing her forward like a hand leading her across ice. Lira asked about her stay in the manor, about how the lessons were treating her, about whether she was sleeping well. Each inquiry was measured, her tone laced with warmth but her eyes sharp enough to cut through every word of Syloki’s answers. Nervously at first, Syloki replied in short

bursts, careful, testing the ground. “The studying is… overwhelming, but in a good way, if that makes sense? I mean, I’ve learned more in a week than I did in years on the street. It’s… different. Very different.” Her hands fluttered as she spoke, her voice picking up speed with every sentence, her shoulders loosening under the rhythm of her own chatter. The more Lira nodded, the more Syloki’s tongue uncoiled, words spilling out faster, easier, as though her nervousness had nowhere to go but forward.

“I mean, who knew magic was in everything, right? Shadows, whispers, even just the way people’s faces change when you talk to them the right way—it’s wild. I lit a candle the other night, with just my hand, just a little spark, but it felt like I’d wrestled a storm into a jar. I screamed so loud I think the whole manor heard me. It’s… it’s addictive, really, like finally seeing how the city breathes.” She laughed at herself, bright and awkward, hands gesturing too wide, and for a while the warmth in Lira’s expression seemed almost real, almost kind. Syloki leaned forward on the edge of her chair, her chatter running quicksilver, unstoppable now.

And then the words slipped out before she could stop them. “I just wish I hadn’t been barred from the world outside,” she said, the sentence tumbling free like a stone dropped from her lips. The silence that followed was immediate and absolute, snapping tight between them. Syloki froze, her breath catching, her mouth still half-open as if she might claw the words back, but it was too late. Across the table, Lira’s expression shifted, the warmth cooling in an instant, her eyes sharpening like a blade unsheathed. The two women locked gazes in the heavy quiet, one pair of eyes trembling with regret and fear, the other steady, cold, measuring. It was not anger yet, but something far more dangerous—scrutiny.

Lira’s lips curved faintly, though the smile did not touch her eyes, and her voice came smooth as silk drawn over glass. “You have not been barred from the outside, my dear,” she said, the words laced with a warmth that felt carefully measured, precise as a surgeon’s hand. Syloki laughed too quickly, a nervous little burst that rattled in her throat before she could smooth it into something lighter. “Yeah, I know, I didn’t mean it like that,” she rushed, her hands flicking a dismissive gesture in the air as though waving away her own mistake. “I meant… well… it’s just that I haven’t seen anyone outside yet. It’s been what? A week and a half since I moved in? Give or take a few days, I guess.” Her laugh turned thin at the edges, her fingers drumming nervously on her knee, betraying the restless energy that always bubbled out when silence pressed too hard against her chest.

Lira’s eyes lingered on her, steady and unreadable, before she leaned back in her chair with the slow grace of someone who had all the time in the world. “The Gloam Sisters are more than walls and roofs, Syloki,” she began, her voice calm, deliberate, as though she were laying out truths carved into stone. “We are more than a group of women living together in shadows. We are a bond. Each Sister learns to protect herself, yes. That is the beginning. But the true lesson—the one that defines us—is that we protect each other above all else. We are the net beneath one another’s falls, the shield against dangers that would tear lesser crews apart. That is what it means to belong here. Not obedience, not fear, but loyalty and trust. Without that, the rest crumbles into dust.” Her words carried the weight of scripture, smooth and unshakable, though her eyes never softened, watching Syloki’s every twitch as though measuring her reaction.

Syloki, never one to leave a silence unfilled, nodded eagerly, her mouth already tumbling into response. “Oh, sure, I’ve seen that. I mean, Sheila’s been like a lifesaver. If she wasn’t around to keep me from drowning in books, I’d probably be babbling to the wall by now—and the wall doesn’t laugh at my jokes, trust me, I’ve tried. She’s been patient, kind, actually listens when I start rambling, which is more than I can say for half the Sisters here. Some of them, well…” she trailed off with a crooked grin, rolling her eyes in a way that made her voice half-joking, half-serious. “Let’s just say they treat me like I’m some buzzing fly in their ear. The basement

especially—spirits, if I never have to stitch another carcass together again it'll be too soon. But I get it, it's a test. Everyone here wants to see if I can handle it. So I'm handling it. Kinda. Mostly." She laughed, shrugging, her shoulders lifting like she could shake off the weight of what she'd just confessed.

Lira inclined her head slightly, her expression unchanged, though her tone dipped into something almost conspiratorial. "Tests are not punishments, Syloki. They are mirrors. They show you who you are when stripped of comfort and illusion. You speak of patience, kindness—that is good, it means you recognize what makes us strong. You speak of disdain, of being dismissed—that too is good, because it teaches you where you must grow sharper. Every Sister here has endured the same. They have been measured, doubted, tested until they could no longer doubt themselves. The ones who faltered are not here anymore. The ones who stayed… they are unbreakable." She let the word linger, unbreakable, her gaze fixed and heavy, pressing the syllables down like a stone into Syloki's chest.

Syloki shifted in her seat, her lips pressing into a faint smile, her eyes darting toward the table before lifting again. "Yeah, unbreakable, right. I'm working on that part. I mean, I can talk my way out of a lot of things, but stitching corpses? That's new. It's weird, y'know? Some of the Sisters treat me like I'm a joke, but others, like Sheila, make me feel like maybe I'm actually supposed to be here. It's… it's confusing. I've never had something like this before. A family that wasn't broken, or fostered, or just waiting to disappear. So I keep telling myself, don't screw it up, Syloki. Don't talk too much, don't trip over your own boots, don't be the idiot who ruins it. But then, well, here I am. Talking too much again." Her laugh was thin, but her hands spread helplessly, as though to say, this is who I am, take it or leave it.

Lira tilted her head slightly, a smile curving across her lips, though it gleamed with something too polished to be entirely real. "And yet, you are still here," she said softly, the words carrying a weight that made Syloki's nerves prickle. The silence stretched, Syloki's fingers fidgeting against her sleeve, before she forced herself to lean forward, her voice lowered into something polite but edged with curiosity. "Why are you asking me all this, Lira?" she asked, her tone careful, testing, as though the wrong word might cut her throat. Lira's smile sharpened just slightly, her eyes glinting with a secret Syloki couldn't touch, and she answered with deliberate calm, "Because the opportunity for your first real test has shown up."

Lira leaned back slightly in her chair, fingers steepled together, her gaze never straying from Syloki's face. "A woman came to us," she began, her voice even, almost conversational, though every word carried the weight of judgment. "A single mother, alone in this city, frightened. Her daughter has found a doll—an old thing, cracked porcelain, stitched dress, nothing unusual to the eye. But the girl has become… attached. Obsessed. The doll whispers to her, keeps her awake at night. The priest she begged for aid refused her, of course. Cowards in holy robes seldom dare touch what they don't understand. So she turned to us." She paused, letting the words sink in before continuing, "It should be a simple task. Retrieve the doll, banish the spirit within, and watch the child for a time to ensure no lingering trace remains. A test fit for any of the Sisters."

Syloki tilted her head, lips tugging into a half-nervous grin. "So, why me? I mean—don't get me wrong, I'll do it, but I've barely figured out how to light a candle without setting my sleeve on fire. I'm still tripping over the chants half the time. You sure you don't want someone who, y'know, actually knows what they're doing?" Her words tumbled out quickly, her hands gesturing animatedly, as though to underline just how unprepared she felt. Yet beneath the nerves was a glimmer of curiosity, a spark she couldn't quite hide.

Lira's smile curved faintly, her eyes narrowing as though she saw straight through Syloki's self-deprecation. "Because this is not about power," she said calmly. "It is about how you act in

the field. Magic, skill—those can be taught, refined with time. But instinct? Poise? The ability to stand when the ground shifts beneath you? That is what makes a Sister. This task is not designed to test your command of spells. It is designed to test you." Her tone softened slightly, the faintest flicker of warmth passing through her voice. "Do you understand?"

Syloki swallowed, her grin curling into something wry. "You make it sound like I'm about to sit an exam I didn't study for. But… yeah, I get it. You want to see if I can handle myself when things get messy. And hey, I've handled worse. I mean, I'm still alive, aren't I?" She laughed, the sound quick and nervous, then leaned forward, eyes bright with a restless kind of energy. "Do I get to pick someone to go with me? Please tell me I don't have to do this alone."

Lira inclined her head, her voice as measured as ever. "One Sister, of your choosing." Syloki didn't hesitate, blurting before she could second-guess herself, "Sheila." The name came with a little smile, quick and certain, the decision already written across her face. "She's steady, she doesn't look at me like I'm going to drop dead every five minutes, and she's not afraid to laugh when I make an idiot of myself. I trust her." The faintest ripple of amusement crossed Lira's features, though it was gone as swiftly as it came. "I knew you would choose her," she said, her voice low but firm. "It is wise to seek balance where you lack it. Sheila will keep you grounded." Syloki couldn't help the grin that spread across her face, her nerves momentarily forgotten. "This actually sounds… exciting. I mean, I know it's serious—possessed doll, creepy whispers, all that—but it's my first real mission. My first chance to prove I belong here. I won't screw it up, I promise. I'll—" Lira raised a hand lightly, her calm presence silencing Syloki's bubbling words. "And Pamela will accompany you as well," she said smoothly. "Not to interfere. Only to watch, to ensure things go as they should."

The revelation that Pamela was going to accompany her shook her a little. For a few seconds Syloki just stared at Lira, her mouth dry, her mind spinning, the silence stretching so long it felt like the walls were leaning closer. Even those few seconds weighed like an eternity. Finally, she forced her voice to rise in a breezy, offhanded tone that she prayed didn't betray her nerves. "That's great. Fire Head will be a great tutor, I bet." The words slipped out sharp and sarcastic, her lips twisting in something that wasn't quite a smile. No nervous laugh this time, no playful sparkle in her eyes, just that dry jab she tossed out like a shield. Anyone who knew Syloki closely would've recognized the signs—sarcasm as armor, humor as a knife when she was too rattled to be honest. Whether Lira picked up on it or not, she only gave her a measured smile and a nod, dismissing her with a simple wave of her hand.

Syloki slipped from the room as quickly as she dared, her boots whispering against the polished floor, her head buzzing with a dozen thoughts at once. She needed to prepare, needed to line her mind with what had to be done. The library. Sheila would know. Sheila always seemed to know. On the climb to the second floor, she ran through her mental list like a gambler counting his last coins: banish rune—she still struggled to draw it clean, but she'd practice till her hand cramped; enchantments, something light, something simple, no need for blood or fire here; holy water, yes, couldn't forget that; what else, what else? She pressed her tongue to her teeth in thought, already picturing Sheila rolling her eyes and finishing the list for her. That thought steadied her nerves. If anyone could ground her before her first trial, it would be Sheila.

Halfway down the corridor, she spotted a familiar flash of red hair. Pamela. The woman glided past like a stormcloud, her face carved from cold marble, unbothered, unreadable. Syloki plastered on her grin, dipping into a playful little swagger as she passed. "Hello, partner," she drawled in her best cowgirl impression, tipping an imaginary hat. The joke was hers alone, a private bit of humor she never expected Pamela to share, but she tossed it out anyway, unable to help herself. Pamela didn't even blink. No flicker of recognition, no turn of the head—just that icy stride carrying her down the hall as though Syloki were invisible. Syloki muttered under her

breath as she watched her go, “Tough crowd,” then shrugged and kept on walking, her steps a little quicker now, her grin returning with the thought of where she was headed.

The library smelled of old parchment and faint candle wax, the heavy hush of the room broken only by the occasional creak of the building settling. And there she was. Sheila sat tucked into her usual corner, the book open on her lap, her short blonde hair catching the lamplight so it seemed to glow faintly, her blue eyes moving steadily across the page. She looked serene, untouchable in that moment of quiet study. Syloki, of course, could not leave such peace undisturbed. She crept closer, crouching like a thief, before darting a hand out to jab Sheila in the ribs.

The reaction was immediate. Sheila gasped, her whole body jolting as she let out a sharp little scream before clapping a hand over her own mouth, eyes wide as saucers. “Sy!” she hissed, her voice a harsh whisper edged with a laugh she couldn’t quite swallow. “What are you doing? Scared the piss out of me!” Syloki plopped down beside her with all the grace of a cat who’d knocked over a vase and pretended it meant to. She waved her hand casually, a wicked grin stretching across her face. “Clean it later, blue-eyes. Guess what!” Sheila arched a brow, her breathing still uneven, her cheeks tinged pink as she tried to recover from the ambush. “What?” she whispered, wary, though the corners of her mouth already threatened to curve up. Syloki leaned in, her eyes bright with excitement, her voice bubbling over with triumph she could barely contain. “We are going on my first mission together!!”

Silkbend never pretended to be something it wasn’t. The canals ran sluggish and dark, carrying with them the stink of brine and old oil, the water slapping softly against warped wooden piers that threatened to collapse with one more hard winter. The houses here were pressed together like teeth in a jaw too small for its own mouth, bricks stained with mildew, roofs patched in crooked angles with tarps and tin. Laundry hung in sagging lines between upper windows, shifting gently in the damp air, while cats prowled the edges of trash piles like they were kings of the street. This neighborhood wasn’t proud, but it was alive—every crack in the walls whispered of someone scraping by, someone clinging to their piece of Doskvol with teeth bared. As Syloki walked alongside Sheila and Pamela, she found herself watching the narrow alleys and bent staircases with a strange kind of familiarity; places like this had raised her, fed her, broken her bones and taught her to keep walking anyway.

Sheila’s voice cut through the thick air, steady and patient in that way Syloki always noticed. “Spirits cling to places like this. Or to things. It doesn’t take much, really. Just something they cared about in life, or something that mirrors what they still feel now.” She kept her gaze forward, her short blonde hair catching faint light from a crooked lamppost as they passed. Syloki tilted her head, curiosity obvious in her wide-eyed grin. “So what—you’re saying if I die clutching my favorite boots, I’ll come back to haunt whoever tries to steal them?” Sheila gave a sharp breath through her nose, almost a laugh but not quite, and answered, “If those boots meant more to you than anything else, maybe. Spirits aren’t balanced. They don’t keep a whole range of emotions like we do. They fixate. One feeling. One hunger. That’s all that’s left.” Syloki hummed low in her throat, tapping a finger to her chin as though trying to picture a parade of moody ghosts stomping around Doskvol with singular obsessions.

“Let me guess,” she said, her voice bouncing with her usual chatter, “happy spirits don’t stick around, right? Just the angry ones. The bitter ones. The ones who never got what they wanted.” Sheila glanced at her, blue eyes softening at the observation. “Mostly. Joy fades faster than rage. Peace doesn’t anchor anyone here. But anger, grief, jealousy—those don’t let go so easily.” Syloki whistled between her teeth, shaking her head. “That explains a lot about this city. Feels like all of Doskvol is one big angry ghost, waiting to pull the living down with it.” Pamela,

walking on Syloki's other side, gave a soft scoff but didn't join in, her arms folded across her chest as she scanned the streets with a detached kind of vigilance. Syloki didn't bother poking at her—Pamela's silence had teeth, and it was better to bounce off Sheila's patience than test that particular firebrand's temper.

"Alright," Syloki pressed, still chewing on Sheila's words, "but then what about the energy stuff? The way people keep talking about electroplasm like it's miracle lightning in a bottle. I keep seeing lamps that burn brighter than oil ever could, machines that hum like they're alive. But they say it's dangerous, too. So… which is it?" Sheila pursed her lips, clearly used to being peppered with questions. "Both. Electroplasm is spirit energy—distilled, captured, weaponized. The factories take the raw essence from the ghost field and compress it until it's stable enough to burn. That's what powers the lamps, the trams, half the industry in Doskvol now. But it's unstable. Mishandle it, and it reacts violently. Leaks, ruptures, overloads—sometimes the energy calls spirits back, dragging them screaming into whatever's nearby." Syloki's eyes widened, her hand fluttering to her chest. "So basically, it's haunted lightning. Good to know. I'll remember that next time I feel like sticking a fork in a socket."

Sheila actually laughed this time, shaking her head with an incredulous smile. "Don't. You'd be surprised how many people get fried by their own arrogance." Syloki grinned wide at the sound, her shoulders relaxing despite the heaviness of the conversation. She thrived on that tiny crack in Sheila's calm, the proof that underneath the dim composure she had a warmth that could be coaxed out if you were stubborn enough. "Hey, don't tempt me. I've got a history of terrible ideas, and I don't need encouragement." Sheila gave her a sideways look, both exasperated and amused, and muttered, "That I already knew." Pamela's silence deepened, her gaze fixed ahead with sharp disinterest, but Syloki leaned closer to Sheila and whispered loud enough for both to hear, "See? At least one of you listens to me. That's why you're my favorite."

The three of them turned onto a narrower lane, the canal just visible at the end, black water shifting under a faint lantern glow. The houses here seemed even smaller, the walls close enough that conversations from behind thin windows spilled into the street. Somewhere a baby cried, somewhere else an old man's cough rattled. The smell of fish stew and coal smoke mingled with the damp air. Syloki slowed for a heartbeat, looking around with wide eyes that caught every corner of this struggling neighborhood, and for once she didn't joke. "Spirits would stick here too, huh?" she asked softly. Sheila followed her gaze, then nodded. "Yes. Places like this… they remember. And sometimes the dead remember with them." Syloki shivered, her chatter silenced for just a moment, and even Pamela's lips pressed thinner, as though the weight of that truth sat heavy on all three of their shoulders as they walked on.

The three of them turned up the crooked little path, their boots crunching over damp gravel. The house looked plain but well cared for, its shutters painted a soft green now faded by salt air, and a small row of potted herbs lined the narrow windowsill like proud little soldiers. Before Syloki could even raise her hand to knock, the door snapped open, and a woman stood there, hair pulled back hastily, her face pale with exhaustion. Her eyes darted left, right, then settled on them with the urgency of someone who had been listening for footsteps. "Come in, please, quickly," she urged, voice shaking but warm enough to carry gratitude. Pamela walked in first, straight-backed, silent as stone. Sheila followed with a nod of greeting. Syloki brought up the rear, offering the woman a quick, lopsided smile that was meant to soften the edges of the tension, though her bright eyes flicked around with curiosity the moment she crossed the threshold.

Inside, Syloki was surprised. The house wasn't much by any stretch—two rooms downstairs, the walls bare, the furniture patched and worn from long years—but it was spotless. The wooden floor was scrubbed to a sheen, the air smelled faintly of lemon oil, and everything had its place. A small stack of folded laundry sat neatly on a chair, and even the chipped teacups on

the shelf had been lined in an orderly row. The sight warmed her chest in a way she didn't expect. "Cute," she muttered under her breath with a little grin, though she quickly bit her lip to keep from saying more. To Syloki, the care put into such a humble space said everything about the woman who lived here—how she was clinging to dignity and calm even as fear gnawed at her. They were ushered into the living room, where the mother gestured for them to sit. Pamela took the farthest chair, legs crossed, arms folded, her face unreadable. Sheila chose the seat nearest to the mother, a posture of openness. Syloki plopped herself onto the edge of the couch, perched forward as if she couldn't stop herself from leaning closer to every detail.

On the sofa, pressed against her mother's side, sat the little girl. No older than eight, maybe nine, with a mop of brown curls and wide eyes that darted shyly between the sisters and the floor. In her hands, she held the doll. Its porcelain face was pale, lips painted a thin crimson smile, its glassy eyes catching the dim lamplight in a way that made them look alive. The girl combed its hair with an old brush, slow and careful, her small fingers gentle as though she feared hurting it. Syloki's eyes lingered there longer than she meant to, noting the way the girl's thumb stroked the doll's arm absentmindedly, the way her lips moved almost as though she were whispering to it under her breath. A protective closeness radiated from her posture, and Syloki's gut twisted faintly—this wasn't the usual innocent play between a child and her toy.

The mother cleared her throat, drawing herself up straighter as if forcing herself to appear calm. "It started a month ago," she began, her voice soft but fraying at the edges. "She found the doll at the market—said someone gave it to her, though no one saw who. At first, I thought nothing of it. A gift, maybe. But then she started talking to it, long talks, whispering, giggling in her room. I thought… it was just a child's game. Then I heard it. A voice. Not hers. Low. Strange. Talking back to her." Her fingers twisted together in her lap, knuckles white, as she cast a glance at her daughter, who kept her eyes lowered to the doll's glossy hair. Syloki tilted her head, studying the way the girl's mouth curled faintly upward, the kind of smile too secretive for her age.

"It moves sometimes," the woman continued, her voice dropping lower, as if afraid the doll itself might be listening. "I've seen it. On the table one moment, gone the next. And always, always it ends up back in her bed. Even when I throw it out." The words came in a rush now, her composure slipping. "Last night I woke up and found it in my kitchen, rocking in a chair. This morning, it was by the door, waiting." She pressed her hand over her chest, trying to steady her breath. Pamela, from her chair, arched an eyebrow but said nothing, her cold gaze resting on the doll with mild disinterest, as if this were beneath her. Sheila leaned forward, her voice soft, steady. "You did the right thing by calling us."

The little girl finally spoke then, her voice small but stubborn. "She doesn't vanish," she said, hugging the doll tighter to her chest. "She just goes away. But she always comes back when I call her." Her mother flinched at the words, reaching to touch her daughter's arm, but the girl only hugged the doll tighter, comb forgotten, eyes flashing in quiet defiance. Syloki's lips parted, her heart sinking as she caught the obsession burning in that tiny expression. The mother's voice cracked with a plea as she turned back to them, desperation spilling free. "Please. You see? It's not just me. She's different now. This thing is inside my house, inside my child. I can't lose her. Please, you must help us." Syloki swallowed hard, her fingers fidgeting in her lap as her sharp eyes darted between the girl's clenched arms, the doll's lifeless smile, and the shadow of fear carved deep into the mother's face. Something was wrong here, wrong enough that even Syloki's chatter caught in her throat.

Sheila leaned in toward the mother, voice hushed and reassuring, asking about when the whispers began and whether the priest had seen the doll with his own eyes. Pamela sat back in her chair, arms crossed, her expression flat as stone, only interjecting with clipped questions about where the doll had been found and what exactly the girl claimed to hear. Syloki, meanwhile, had drifted—her bright eyes sliding away from the heavy conversation at the table

and fixing on the little girl. She shifted forward on the sofa, dropping her chin into her palm with a crooked smile that was meant to be friendly. “Hey,” she whispered, tilting her head slightly, “what’s her name?” The girl blinked at her, a flicker of caution in her gaze, but then she smiled softly, the kind of secret smile children reserve for close friends. “He doesn’t like names,” she said, hugging the doll tighter, “but he talks to me. He says things.” Her voice was dreamy, unfocused, the brush still dangling from her fingers as she smoothed the doll’s hair with her palm. Syloki’s smile faltered just a little, though she kept her tone light. “Oh yeah? Like what kind of things?”

The answers came in a trickle, scattered and strange, the kind of rambling that made Syloki’s brow knit even as she forced her grin to stay put. “He says he doesn’t like it here. He says the house by the canal is prettier. That’s where he wants to go. That’s where he lived.” She rocked the doll in her lap like a baby, her gaze distant. “Sometimes he gets mad if I don’t listen. Sometimes he makes me cry, but then he says sorry. He says he’ll always come back.” Syloki’s stomach tightened at the phrasing, her intuition ringing like a soft bell in the back of her mind. One of the Sisters’ earliest lessons came to her then, sharp and certain: *listen to your intuition.* Spirits twisted words, tangled truths and lies together until you couldn’t tell which was which, but the pull in her gut told her something here was real, even if the girl couldn’t explain it. Syloki’s fingers tapped nervously against her knee, her gaze flicking toward Sheila and Pamela briefly before settling back on the child.

The girl’s voice dropped lower, her small lips brushing against the doll’s porcelain ear as if whispering to a confidant. “He says you’re loud,” she murmured, eyes flicking up to Syloki briefly with a flicker of amusement, “but he likes you. He says you’re different.” Syloki’s smile twitched, half amused, half unsettled, her throat working around a dry swallow. She leaned back slightly, fiddling with a loose thread on her sleeve, trying not to let the unease creep too plainly into her expression. Something about the way the girl spoke—sometimes with her own voice, sometimes with a cadence that felt borrowed—put a chill at the base of her spine. She forced herself to keep her voice casual, even playful. “Well, tell him thanks. I like him too. But don’t tell him I said that, alright? He might get a big head.” The girl giggled, a sound sweet but uncanny in the shadow of her words, and then without another word, she hopped off the sofa.

Syloki blinked, watching the girl’s small figure shuffle toward the kitchen, the doll still clutched close against her chest. She let her go, expecting her to return in a moment with the toy still in her arms, but when the child came back a few minutes later, her hands were empty. She walked straight to her mother’s side, sliding onto the couch beside her again as if nothing were amiss. Syloki tilted her head, narrowing her eyes slightly, her gut prickling. “Hey, where’s your friend?” she asked lightly, pointing at the empty crook of the girl’s arm. The little one blinked, then gave a solemn little shrug, her voice calm, almost casual. “He asked to be left alone. He doesn’t like strangers.”

The air seemed to thicken at that, silence falling across the room for a beat too long. Sheila’s brows drew together, her gaze flicking toward Syloki with quiet alarm, while Pamela shifted slightly in her seat, eyes narrowing on the child. Syloki felt her chest tighten, a flicker of cold sliding down her spine, but she kept her grin in place, forcing her tone into its usual bubbly warmth even as her fingers dug against her knee. “Ah. Right. Everyone needs their space sometimes,” she said, though her heart thumped with unease. Intuition whispered in her ear, louder now, sharp and insistent: something was pulling the strings here, and it wasn’t the little girl.

The mother’s voice wavered as she spoke, her hands clutching a handkerchief that was already twisted near to shreds between her fingers. She sat on the edge of her seat, back bent, shoulders trembling, eyes red from nights without sleep. “I don’t know what to do anymore,” she whispered, her voice cracking under the weight of desperation. “She’s all I have. I can’t lose her

too.” Every time she tried to look her daughter in the eye, the little girl’s small face was turned downward, her knuckles white where they clutched at her skirt, as if she knew something inside her had become too large to carry but was powerless to let it go. Syloki leaned forward, elbows pressed to her knees, nodding with that eager sympathy she always wore when someone spoke of their child. She murmured a soft, “We’ll figure it out, don’t worry,” though her throat burned as she said it, because promises like that always felt like lies when ghosts were involved. Sheila reached across the table with steady hands, setting her palm over the woman’s trembling ones, her calmness a tether in the rising storm. Pamela sat back in her chair, her lips pressed into a thin line, her silence heavier than the creak of the house around them, but her eyes never left the child.

The sound from the kitchen shattered the fragile air in an instant—a crash of glass splintering against tile, loud and violent. Everyone froze. The mother’s breath hitched sharp, but the girl reacted first, her whole body lurching forward like a wire pulled taut. “No, don’t go! Please! They are friends!” she cried, her voice breaking with panic, tears springing instantly to her eyes. The doll was gone, Syloki realized, the absence in the girl’s arms screaming louder than the noise from the kitchen had. The mother shot to her feet, clutching her daughter in a fierce grip, wrapping both arms around her as the child kicked and struggled with surprising strength, thin little legs thrashing, fingernails clawing against her mother’s sleeve. “Stay with me, baby, stay with me,” the woman begged, rocking her back, her voice a chant of desperation that only made the girl cry harder. The whole scene swelled with raw, frantic energy, like the ghost’s hand was stirring it from just out of sight.

“She’s gone, she’s gone!” the girl sobbed into her mother’s shoulder, her voice muffled but high and keening. “She needs me, she doesn’t like to be left alone! Please, I have to go to her, I have to!” Her small fists pounded against her mother’s back, her entire body writhing with an obsession that felt too large for a child to bear. The mother turned her face up toward the sisters, her eyes wide, pleading, as tears streaked down her cheeks. “This is what happens, every time. Every time it vanishes, she won’t stop until it comes back, or she runs away from me to find it. I can’t hold her forever. I can’t…” Her voice broke, and she buried her face in her daughter’s hair, clutching her like she was made of porcelain herself, like she would shatter if she let go. Syloki’s chest tightened painfully at the sight, a dull ache blooming where her own memories of loss gnawed raw.

The girl’s words spilled between sobs, the same refrain she had spoken earlier, but now with frantic urgency: “The house by the canal! That’s where it always goes. The house with the garden. That’s where she is!” The mother blinked in confusion, shaking her head, but fear strangled any denial before it could leave her lips. She had seen enough to know her daughter wasn’t speaking nonsense. Sheila shot Syloki a grim glance, her blue eyes hardening with resolve, while Pamela finally stirred from her silence, unfolding her arms and leaning forward, her voice cold and sharp. “Then that’s where we go. Tonight.” Her words cut through the sobs, through the prayers, through the hollow dread that had begun to seep into the edges of the room. The girl clung tighter to her mother, burying her face in her neck, her cries softening into hoarse little whimpers, and the sisters stood, each movement deliberate, as if by leaving their chairs they were already accepting the weight of the task.

Syloki crouched down just long enough to meet the girl’s eyes, softening her voice to a conspiratorial murmur. “We’ll bring her back, promise. You don’t need to worry about strangers anymore.” The words felt brittle, her smile trembling with the effort of keeping it warm, but the girl’s gaze softened for just a heartbeat, her tiny nod almost imperceptible before she burrowed back into her mother’s embrace. Sheila’s hand brushed Syloki’s shoulder, steadying her, and together they stepped back. Pamela, with her arms folded once more, gave the woman a curt nod. “We’ll handle it.” No kindness, no promises—just certainty. The mother clutched her

daughter tighter, her lips moving in silent thanks, but the lines on her face never smoothed. Relief was too far away to touch.

The night air hit them with a damp chill as they stepped back into the narrow street, the smell of canal water and chimney smoke settling heavy in their lungs. Syloki rubbed her arms, shivering despite the cloak she wore, her mind still tangled in the sound of the girl's cries. "House by the canal," she repeated, her voice quick and anxious, "but that could mean any of them, right? There's dozens." Sheila shook her head, her tone patient but firm. "Not just any. Abandoned, overgrown garden, most likely. Spirits cling to places tied to them—where they died, where they loved, where they hurt the most. If the girl's so sure, it has to be the same place every time." She brushed a stray lock of blonde hair from her face, her expression thoughtful. Syloki chewed her lip, nodding, her mind already running ahead. "So the spirit's anchored there. The doll's just a… what, a bridge?"

"Not just a bridge," Pamela cut in, her voice flat and corrective, like a blade slicing through their musings. "A tether. An object like that, carried and cared for by the child, strengthens the spirit's hold. Makes it easier for it to move, easier to manipulate. Without it, it would have far less reach." Her eyes slid sidelong toward Syloki, sharp as glass. "You'd know that if you paid more attention to your studies instead of filling every room with noise." Syloki's jaw snapped shut, her retort curling on her tongue, but Sheila quickly stepped in with a calm nod, redirecting. "Alright, a tether then. Either way, it's dangerous. If the doll keeps vanishing and returning, the spirit is willful. It's not a passive haunting—it's active. That means it's feeding on the girl already." The words made Syloki's gut twist, and she hugged her arms tighter, biting the inside of her cheek.

Syloki tried again, her words tumbling out quick, almost tripping over each other. "But if it's feeding, then it has to be tied to something stronger than just her, right? Like… maybe the canal house itself? Maybe there's more there than just the doll?" She looked between them with wide eyes, eager, desperate for confirmation. Sheila tilted her head, considering, her blue eyes soft with patience. "It's possible. A place that draws it back again and again might be where it died. Or worse, where it was made." Her voice dropped at the last word, the weight of it sinking like a stone into the street between them. Syloki shivered, picturing the child's small hands brushing that doll's hair, the glassy eyes glinting in the lamplight, and muttered, "Spirits above, that's worse, isn't it?" Pamela's voice came sharp from the shadows, slicing away the fear with cold fact. "Doesn't matter what it is. We'll burn it out."

The walk stretched on in silence for a moment, boots clattering softly against damp cobblestones, the city around them alive with muffled laughter, distant canal songs, the creak of wooden shutters. Syloki fidgeted with her scarf, muttering under her breath just loud enough for the others to hear. "We can't just burn it out, though. What if the girl is still tied to it? What if breaking it just—hurts her?" Sheila's gaze snapped to her, sharp for once, her patience thinning. "That's why we go carefully. That's why we find the root. Don't get ahead of yourself, Sy." Her tone softened almost instantly, regret flickering across her features, and she added, "You're asking the right questions. But let's wait until we see it." Pamela, however, didn't soften—her scoff rang out low and dismissive. "If you're too afraid to cut ties, then you shouldn't have come at all." Syloki bristled, her lips parting with a sharp retort, but she swallowed it, her fists clenching at her sides, choosing silence over another barb.

By the time the canal came into view, the night's mist was thick enough to curl around their ankles, swallowing the edges of the street in pale gray. Syloki's heart hammered with both fear and a giddy spark of purpose—her first mission, her first real test, and already the city itself felt like it was holding its breath. Sheila slowed her pace, scanning the dark stretch of homes that lined the water, her posture alert but steady. Pamela strode ahead, boots striking hard against stone, her cloak trailing like a slash of black shadow. Syloki lagged behind for a step, her hands shoved into her pockets, her nervous chatter tamped down to nothing by the heavy weight of

the task pressing against her ribs. She glanced sidelong at Sheila, then whispered just loud enough for her alone. “Tell me I don’t mess this up.” Sheila’s faint smile in return was enough to hold her steady, even as the night seemed to grow colder the closer they drew to that waiting house.

The house stood hunched at the edge of the canal like a drunk too stubborn to fall, its roof sagging, its shutters warped and hanging by rusted hinges. The rest of the lane was poor, yes, but lived-in—windows patched with cloth, chimneys coughing steady smoke, doors painted in whatever color a family could afford. This place was different. The weeds had grown wild and tall, choking what once might have been a proud little garden. Moss streaked the walls, black as tar, and the brick itself seemed to sweat in the mist, giving the whole façade a damp, sickly sheen. Syloki stared up at it, her lips pressing thin, while the sound of the canal water lapping against the embankment echoed faintly behind them. The air felt heavier here, as though the mist thickened into something with teeth, curling against her skin and waiting. Even the cats that prowled Silkbend’s alleys gave the garden a wide berth, darting quick across the street to avoid stepping on its stones.

Sheila folded her arms over her chest, her blue eyes narrowing as she took in the crooked fence and the darkened windows. “This is the kind of place people cross the street to avoid,” she muttered, her voice low, but steady. “Looks like it’s been waiting for us.” She shifted her weight, the gravel crunching beneath her boots, and Syloki caught the way her fingers twitched near her belt, restless and alert. Pamela, who had been silent all along, finally tilted her head toward them, her voice level and uncharacteristically direct. “Magic isn’t about books, or chants, not when it matters. It’s about what you feel. About listening.” Her eyes lingered on both of them before she asked, smooth and deliberate, “So. What do you feel, standing here?”

Sheila didn’t answer. Not right away. She looked straight at Syloki instead, as if passing the weight of the question onto her shoulders. It was her trial, after all, her first step into proving she was more than talk and nerves. Syloki swallowed, her throat loud in the silence, and forced herself to listen. Her chest was tight, her knees wanted to turn, every inch of her skin prickled with the instinct to run. She pressed her palms to her thighs, grounding herself, and then admitted, her voice breathless, “Every bone in my body is telling me to leave. To turn around and get as far away from this place as I can. It feels wrong. Like—like every shadow’s watching, waiting for me to blink.” The words tumbled out, sharp and fast, but her eyes didn’t waver from the house.

Sheila nodded once, firm and simple, the faintest ghost of agreement flickering across her face. Pamela, though, arched her brow, and her lips curved into something that almost resembled approval. “Good,” she said, her tone calm, decisive. “That’s the truth of it. That dread crawling in your bones? That’s the energy here. It means you’re not walking into nothing. The doll won’t be the only thing waiting inside.” Her gaze drifted past them, to the tall grass that had swallowed the fence whole. She crouched slightly, her cold hand brushing against the long blades, stroking them as if they were fur, her touch unhurried, deliberate. Syloki frowned, her brows knitting together at the strange gesture, but she bit down the question, tucking the image away in her mind to puzzle over later. Pamela was always strange, but this—this was different.

Her breath caught in her throat, and she forced herself to swallow loud enough that the sound echoed between her ears. Fear buzzed sharp under her ribs, but she wouldn’t let it rule her. Not tonight. Not in front of them. She squared her shoulders, her boots crunching forward on the gravel, each step deliberate, heavy with determination. “Come on,” she muttered, almost to herself, though the other two followed close behind. The garden gave way beneath their boots, weeds bending, earth soft and damp, until the crooked path spat them out before the door. The

wood was swollen with water, the hinges rusted, and yet it hung half open, as though someone had already been waiting. And there, sitting neatly against the threshold, was the doll. Upright, still, placed with a care that made Syloki's skin crawl.

Her steps slowed, her pulse thudding hard in her ears. She crouched slightly, tilting her head, and raised one hand in a small, wavering wave. "Hi, little buddy," she whispered, her voice pitched the way she might speak to a child hiding behind its mother's skirts. Her grin was crooked, nervous, but she forced it wider anyway, like plastering over a crack in glass. The mist pressed against the back of her neck, cold and damp, and then the window to her right slammed shut with a bang sharp enough to cut through bone. She shrieked, loud and unthinking, the sound tearing free before she could swallow it back. Sheila jolted, her hand darting toward her side instinctively, while Pamela's head snapped around, her expression unchanged but her eyes flashing like blades.

Syloki's cheeks burned hot, shame crawling up her throat as she straightened too quickly, rubbing her arm with a sheepish laugh. "Sorry! Reflex. Didn't mean to—yeah. Sorry." She glanced between them, her voice shrinking under the weight of their stares. Sheila, merciful as ever, only gave her a small smile, a reassurance that softened the sting, while Pamela's icy gaze cut straight through her, cold and unyielding. Syloki fumbled with her scarf, tugging it tighter around her throat, as though it could hide her embarrassment. She turned back to the doorway, her mouth half open to mutter another apology—but her words died in her throat. The threshold was empty. The doll was gone.

Her breath hitched, her stomach twisting in a hard knot. Was it ever there? She blinked hard, her eyes darting across the cracked floorboards, the weeds spilling over the steps, the darkened hall just beyond the door. Nothing. Her fingers twitched at her sides, curling into fists, and she felt the gnaw of doubt chewing through her resolve. Had she imagined it? Or worse, had it wanted her to see it, only to slip away the moment she reached out? Syloki licked her lips, her throat dry as stone, and whispered under her breath, almost too quiet to hear, "Spirits above… what did I just miss?"

Syloki's eyes darted from the empty doorway back to the other two, her grin curling back into place despite the knot still twisting in her gut. "So…" she whispered, her tone half-joking, half-testing the silence, "should we just walk in?" Her voice echoed faintly against the half-open door, as though the house itself had been waiting for the question. Sheila gave a casual shrug, her voice low but steady, "Might as well. We're here already." But Syloki noticed—Pamela didn't move. She stood rooted to the path, her arms folded, her gaze sharp and unreadable, lips pressed in a thin line that refused to part. That icy stillness made Syloki tilt her head, her brow quirking, her grin sharpening with challenge. "What's the matter, Fire Head? Afraid the scary ghosts will muss up your perfect hair?" She stepped forward in exaggerated bravado, her boot thumping against the wooden step as though to prove a point, and Sheila followed at her side, her own movements quieter but loyal all the same.

It wasn't until Syloki turned back, peering over her shoulder, that she realized Pamela hadn't moved at all. The redhead stood just beyond the weeds, the mist curling around her legs like a patient animal, her stillness heavier than any wall. "Wait—seriously?" Syloki asked, eyes wide, her voice half a laugh, half an incredulous protest. "You're just gonna… stay out there? While we go inside and do the fun part?" Pamela's gaze met hers, flat and cutting, and her voice finally broke the hush. "No one has stepped in there for weeks," she said coolly, her words crisp, deliberate. "Not since the girl. This house is empty of the living. Only the dead remain. That is your trial. Mine is to observe." Her tone was not defensive, not evasive, but it landed cold as stone, final and certain.

Syloki's jaw dropped, then she lifted her hand in a sarcastic gesture, thumb raised high, her grin all sharp irony. "Great. Love that for us. Thanks for the moral support." She waggled her thumb once for emphasis before dropping it, then spun on her heel and marched inside with Sheila, muttering, "Observe this," under her breath. The air inside was colder, the damp walls leeching the warmth from her skin the moment she crossed the threshold. Dust clung thick to every surface, cobwebs hung like drapes in the corners, and the floor groaned with each step as though protesting their intrusion. The darkness pressed close, broken only by the thin slice of moonlight through the warped shutters, and Syloki couldn't help the way her shoulders hunched slightly, her scarf tugged higher against her throat.

Sheila leaned in close, her voice low, careful not to carry too far in the hollow silence. "Stay sharp," she whispered, her hand brushing the edge of her cloak as though to remind herself of the talismans hidden there. Syloki, of course, leaned closer still, her grin flashing mischievous even in the gloom. "Did you see that, blue-eyes? She's afraid of ghosts. That's why she won't come in. Standing out there with her arms crossed like some statue—it's fear, I'm telling you." Her voice carried a conspiratorial sing-song, her words tumbling too quick as if to fill the dark pressing in around them. Sheila sighed softly, her lips quirking despite herself. "Sy… I don't think that's the case."

Syloki gasped theatrically, her hand pressed against her chest in mock offense. "Of course it is! What else could it be? Observe from a distance, she says. Distance never works. That's why she can't get a boyfriend—always standing ten feet away, staring cold as ice. No one wants to date a gargoyle." The whisper burst into a giggle, her shoulders shaking as she clamped a hand over her mouth to stifle the sound. Sheila bit her lip, trying—and failing—not to laugh, her soft chuckle slipping free despite the tension in her eyes. For just a flicker of a moment, the heavy air seemed thinner, the darkness less suffocating, as if their shared humor carved out a pocket of warmth in the cold belly of the house.

They both knew it wasn't true. Pamela wasn't afraid, not of this, not of anything Syloki could name. But the joke was needed, a thread of light to hold onto in the suffocating dark. Their laughter echoed faintly against the bare walls, too small and too short-lived to last. Still, for that breath of time, the two of them clung to it, to each other, as the shadows whispered deeper into the house, promising they wouldn't be laughing long.

Inside the house they started moving carefully, their footsteps muffled against the warped wooden boards that creaked under every shift of weight. Syloki tugged a bracelet from her pocket, the one she had so stubbornly refused to wear earlier because, in her words, it looked like something a child would make out of scrap wire and glass beads. She should have had it on like Sheila did—her friend's glowing faintly around her wrist, practical and without fuss—but Syloki always worried about how it clashed with her outfit. Tonight, though, it wasn't a question of fashion. She slid it on, shaking her head at herself, and the small sigils etched into the band shimmered faintly as if awakened by the stale, charged air of the house. She held it up like a lantern, arm outstretched before every doorframe they passed, watching the glow thicken and pulse when it aligned toward something unseen. Each flicker sent a cold ripple through her spine, as though the bracelet was tugging her nerves toward the truth.

Sheila walked slightly behind, her own bracelet humming in faint sympathy, while Syloki treated hers like a compass needle, sweeping left and right before stepping into each space. Every time the glow sparked brighter, she froze, her breath catching in her throat, eyes darting at empty corners as though shadows themselves might lunge. The smell of mildew was thick in this house, damp air rolling in from the canals, but underneath it Syloki swore she could taste something sharper—burnt copper, the tang of electroplasm, exactly as the books had warned her about. Pamela stayed behind in the entryway, her voice cool as she reminded them, "Follow

it where it leads. Don't waste time." Syloki muttered under her breath about babysitters and their moods, but pressed forward, her bracelet flaring hotter the deeper they went.

The trail pulled them through a narrow hall with faded wallpaper peeling in jagged strips, then down to a room at the back. The air grew heavier there, dense enough that Syloki's ears rang like pressure before a storm. And then she saw it. The doll sat waiting in a rocking chair, its limp arms resting across its lap, its head tilted slightly to one side as though it had turned to greet them. The wood of the chair moved in the faintest rhythm, creaking without wind or touch. Syloki stopped in the doorway and let out a dry laugh, muttering mostly to herself, "Classic." Sheila, though tense, couldn't help the small chuckle that escaped her lips, though her hands were already moving for her bag.

Syloki swallowed, putting on a mask of casual bravado even as every bone in her body whispered that this was wrong, too easy, too deliberate. She lifted her hand in a half-wave, her tone light as she called toward the doll, "If you could stop running, that'd be great, friend. I just want to talk." Her voice wavered only slightly on the last word, though she forced a smile to cover it. The rocking chair's creak slowed, but didn't stop, and Syloki couldn't tell if that was better or worse. She took another step forward, bracelet glowing steady now, no longer pulsing—it was locked onto this spot, on the thing bound to that toy.

Behind her, Sheila knelt on the warped floor, pulling a stick of chalk from her satchel. She set her jaw, focused, and began drawing the first careful lines of a circle, steady strokes practiced into muscle memory. Syloki glanced over her shoulder, nodding as if to reassure herself. She knew the process, had studied it in those sleepless nights upstairs in the manor. It was supposed to be simple—banishment circles always were when described in the safety of candlelit rooms. Draw the rune, place the anchor in the middle, a splash of holy water, a chant in a language she couldn't pronounce right even in practice, and the spirit was freed, cut from the tether that kept it bound.

Syloki's eyes drifted back to the doll, her stomach tightening as she crept closer. It hadn't moved, not an inch, yet she couldn't shake the feeling it was watching her, waiting. Her mind told her to laugh it off, to crack a joke about bedtime stories and creepy toys, but her throat was dry. "Alright," she whispered under her breath, more to herself than to the others, "let's make this quick." Every instinct screamed that nothing about this was going to be quick, or easy, but she forced her boots forward anyway, step by step toward the chair, willing her nerves to hold steady.

The bracelet's glow sharpened into a near-constant burn against her skin as she reached the edge of the circle Sheila was finishing. The air seemed to hum around her ears now, faint but growing, like voices whispering too softly to make out the words. Syloki clenched her jaw, shaking her head slightly as though that could silence them. She forced her gaze onto the doll, its glassy eyes fixed in a blank stare that seemed almost… patient. Her fingers twitched at her side, ready to grab it, even as her heart thundered louder than the creaking wood.

Her gut told her it was too simple. Far, far too simple. But she pushed the warning down, lips pressed into a thin smile as she murmured, "Here we go, little buddy," and leaned toward the chair, prepared to scoop it up into her arms. The floor under her boot groaned, the silence in the room stretched taut, and every nerve in her body braced for what came next.

As Syloki's fingers stretched toward the doll's frayed dress, the air snapped with a violent crack, like wood splintering under an invisible axe. A heavy cabinet in the corner lurched forward, crashing onto its side with a bone-rattling thud, landing so close to Sheila that the floorboards trembled under both their feet. Both women screamed, Syloki stumbling back while Sheila flinched with her chalk still in hand, the half-finished runes now smeared into nothing beneath

scattered dust. “Oh come on,” Sheila shouted, voice sharp with frustration, “those were my best ones so far!” Her anger cracked against the oppressive silence, but the silence cracked back harder. A presence pressed in, thick as tar, seeping from the walls themselves.

Syloki’s hands shook as she pulled her pistol free, jaw clenched, fumbling to load the dull metallic rounds that glimmered faintly with the swirling green of electroplasm. The weight of it steadied her, familiar and real in a place where nothing else felt grounded. She bit down against the bile rising in her throat, muttering, “To hell with protocol,” as she snapped the chamber shut, “I’ll end this the quick way.” The gun gave off a faint hum of power, the bullets pulsing with energy volatile enough to rip a ghost apart if she got a clean shot. She raised it, aiming toward the empty corner where the bracelet’s glow seemed thickest.

Then, from nowhere and everywhere at once, came the sound. A laugh — soft at first, like a stage whisper drifting through velvet curtains, then growing into something jagged and bitter, echoing from the rafters and seeping from the floorboards. The voice was unmistakably female, and filled with a performance’s cruel theatrics, as though the room itself had become a stage. Syloki’s heart dropped into her stomach. She forced her lips into a smile that came out twisted and false, her voice shaky as she stammered, “H-hello?”

The answer came with violence. A chair wrenched itself from the ground and flew across the room with sudden, brutal speed, slamming into Syloki’s arm so hard she yelped in pain, the pistol clattering from her hand and skidding across the floor out of reach. She gasped, clutching her bruised arm, and Sheila cursed, dropping her chalk to sprint forward, catching Syloki before she lost her balance completely. “Sy!” Sheila’s voice broke with panic, pulling her upright, shielding her with a desperate arm as she scanned the swirling shadows.

And then it began. The figure came together in the corner, tall and gaunt, her form wavering as though stitched from smoke and sorrow. The tattered folds of a mourning dress hung heavy around her, swaying with a wind that wasn’t there, a cracked porcelain mask covering half her ruined face. Through the broken slits of that mask came words — not her words, but lines spoken in some macabre theater of death. “Behold… The Painted Widow and the condemned, dragged into the light… his life weighed and measured before the crowd…” Her voice shifted mid-line, warping into the raw scream of a dying man, echoing off the walls with such force it rattled the windows.

The sound bent the room around them, phantom cries rolling like waves from every direction. The air itself seemed to claw at their throats, choking them with the stench of smoke and old blood. The shadows along the walls stretched and twisted, forming grasping arms that dragged along the peeling wallpaper, fingers of black reaching toward the sisters. Sheila’s grip on Syloki tightened as she hissed through her teeth, “Stay behind me!” but even she faltered under the pressure, her breath shallow, her face pale.

The Painted Widow’s voice broke again, caught between a sob and a scream, her cracked mask shifting as if it might shatter with the force of her fury. “I was made to speak his tale! I was made to wear his sorrow! Before the crowd… before his wife… before his children!” Her voice dissolved into weeping, then rose again in rage so sharp it shook dust from the rafters. “And when I dared resist… when I tried to break free—” Her arms, too long and too thin, snapped outward, flinging invisible force across the room as shards of broken glass lifted from the floor and whirled through the air like knives.

Syloki could only cling to Sheila, her bracelet glowing brighter and brighter until the light burned against her skin, the warning clear: they were not alone in this house, and this spirit’s story was far from finished. The Painted Widow’s lament rolled on, turning the room into a chorus of

agony, each line slicing through the dark with the weight of her final moments, as though her death was being performed again, and again, for them.

The room groaned as if the very beams of the house remembered that night, dust trembling loose from the ceiling, the air vibrating with a tension that scraped against their bones. The Painted Widow's mask tilted toward them, the porcelain grin cracked into something monstrous, her shadow elongating across the warped walls until it seemed to swallow every corner. Her voice poured out, uneven, tangled with sobs and shrieks, a performance broken in half, spilling pieces of her torment like shards of glass. "He brought me here… no, no, it was the stage, the lights, the crowd—no stage at all, just walls, rotting walls and their faces pressed against them. The terror of Doskvol stood above us, smiling, always smiling. He said I was lovely, graceful, my voice perfect for his little theater. He said I would be his widow before the play ended." Her words twisted into a bitter laugh that curdled the blood in their veins.

Syloki reached for her pistol with her uninjured hand, sliding it across the broken boards toward herself, knuckles pale with desperation. Sheila, her other hand glowing faintly with the trace of a protective sigil, hissed through clenched teeth, "Stay behind me, Sy—I can't cover you both if you rush in!" But even her voice wavered as the Widow's shrieking recital tore through the house. "He dragged the man forward! His wife screamed, his children clawed at the ropes—no, no, they weren't ropes, they were ribbons, red ribbons wrapping him tight, his body twisted into a gift for the crowd! I was forced to speak his tale, to tell of his crimes, his sorrow, his fall. The terror made me his chorus, his opening act! And I read the lines while his bones broke before me." Her scream rose until it wasn't words at all, just raw sound, and the rocking chair splintered apart, its legs flung at the walls like daggers.

Syloki raised the pistol with trembling focus, pulling the trigger. The bullet snapped free, glowing green with electroplasm, and exploded against the Painted Widow's chest. Her body shattered into black mist, scattering like torn curtains across the room. Syloki gasped with relief, lowering the pistol, but her triumph lasted only a heartbeat. From the far corner, the Widow's cracked mask materialized again, her voice crawling from the shadows like worms in earth. "You cannot kill what was already killed. You cannot bury what has already burned." Her figure wavered, then solidified, her skeletal fingers dragging along the wall, leaving behind streaks of frost as she advanced again.

Sheila's hands worked furiously, chalk smeared across the floorboards as she traced a weak protective rune, whispering the old words with a strained voice. A shimmering veil flared between them and the spirit, slowing her advance, but every strike of her voice cracked against it like a hammer on glass. "They screamed at me to stop! They begged me to defy him! And I tried—oh, I tried, I dropped the mask, I dropped the script, but the terror of Doskvol laughed, and with a flick of his hand they cut me open. My beauty was wasted! My grace broken! He made them watch me fall, after I had made them watch him die." Her mask tilted back, laughter ringing high and cruel, and the windows in the room burst inward, showering the sisters in shards of glass as if the house itself were applauding the performance.

Syloki's pistol barked again, another shot of volatile electroplasm, but once more the Widow dissolved, reappearing instantly behind them. The hairs at the nape of Syloki's neck stood stiff, the air icy as she turned too slow to see the ghost's hand slicing through the air toward her. Sheila caught her arm, yanking her aside just as a heavy drawer ripped itself from the desk and smashed against the wall where Syloki had stood. "She's playing with us," Sheila gasped, her rune circle already flickering, "she's not going to let us end this easy!" Her eyes were wide, pupils blown from fear, sweat glistening at her temples.

The Painted Widow's cries filled the room again, half monologue, half lament. "Do you hear them? The children? They watched, they screamed, they begged—and then the flames took

them! The theater burned, the terror's laughter filled the smoke, and I was left to rot, to rage, to play this part forever! My grace, my beauty, my soul—all stolen by him, by the smile beside him, by the terror of Doskvol!" Her voice cracked apart, tumbling into sobs that turned to shrieks, and the floor itself seemed to buck, boards straining as if the dead beneath the house wanted to claw their way up.

Syloki steadied her pistol again, but her hands shook so hard the barrel wavered, the bracelet on her wrist glowing bright enough to blind. Sheila stood her ground in front of her, arms stretched outward, muttering the words of another ward though her voice broke every few syllables. It wasn't enough. The Widow surged again, her presence drowning them in sorrow and fury, her story an endless cycle of torment and rage, dragging the sisters deeper into her haunted stage. The fight was not just for their safety now—it was for their sanity.

The room had become a storm, the very air thrumming with violence. Every breath Syloki drew felt like she was inhaling glass dust, sharp and heavy in her lungs. Sheila braced herself against the wall, one arm raised, glowing faintly with the remnants of a broken ward. Her other arm bled freely from a gash across her shoulder, the dark stain spreading fast through her sleeve. "Sy—stay back—" she rasped, but her voice faltered as another invisible strike sent her staggering sideways, smashing into a table that collapsed under her weight. Syloki's heart hammered in her ears, louder than the ghost's screams, louder than the shattering glass that kept exploding around them.

The Painted Widow loomed, her mask gleaming with cracks that pulsed faintly with ghost-light, her tattered mourning veil trailing behind her like smoke. Her voice climbed higher, shrieking lines in broken order: "He smiled as I fell—no, no, he laughed before the fire—he told me I would be remembered, that my death was the encore! The terror of Doskvol made me his widow and his stage!" Her skeletal fingers snapped outward and another chair ripped itself from the ground, slamming into Sheila's side. She cried out, collapsing to her knees, clutching at her ribs. Blood flecked her lips when she coughed, and Syloki felt her own stomach flip with terror.

Her instincts screamed to run, but instead her mouth ran faster than her thoughts. "Wait—wait!" she shouted, her voice cracking as she tried to draw the Widow's attention away from Sheila. Her eyes darted to the mask, to the cracked lines running like tears down porcelain. "What's your name? You—you were someone before this, weren't you? The Painted Widow… that's what they called you, right?" She edged forward, palms trembling, her pistol still clutched but useless at her side. The Widow's head snapped toward her, the hollow sockets behind the mask burning with pale fire.

Syloki's words tumbled out before fear could choke them down. "I don't understand painting. I don't understand stages or masks or whatever he made you do. But I understand being a widow." Her throat tightened, the words raw, ripped from a wound she rarely let anyone touch. "I know what it's like to have someone torn from you. I know what it's like to have your life shattered because of other people's choices. I know that pain." Her voice cracked again, softer now, desperate. "You're not alone in it. I've lived it too."

For a heartbeat, the room stilled. The Widow's veil hung motionless, her form flickering with something almost human. The mask tilted slightly, as if weighing Syloki's words. Then, with a shriek so piercing it rattled the floorboards loose, the moment shattered. "You dare call yourself a widow? You dare compare your petty grief to mine?" she roared, and the house erupted in fury. The walls shook, portraits crashed from their hooks, and the doll on the rocking chair shone with a blinding pulse of ghost-light. A jagged mirror shattered into a thousand shards, each shard suspended in the air before hurtling toward Syloki and Sheila like knives.

Syloki threw herself flat to the ground, arms over her head, glass biting into her skin as it rained down. Sheila cried out again, curling her body to shield her bleeding side, but another impact knocked the breath from her lungs. Syloki's nerves burned like fire, her hands shaking uncontrollably as she scrambled closer to her friend, the bracelet on her wrist glowing brighter than ever, screaming warning after warning she could barely keep up with.

The Painted Widow's voice filled every corner, fractured into laughter, screams, and sobs all at once. "You cannot know my pain! You cannot feel the fire that stole us! You cannot silence the terror's laughter!" Her skeletal form towered above them, her cracked mask glowing with hate, her veil spreading wide as though she meant to smother them both inside it. Syloki's throat worked as she tried to breathe, her mind reeling with fear and guilt and stubborn defiance, but the only truth she could feel now was this: they were losing. Fast.

The room spun with violence, every crash and shudder pressing Syloki and Sheila further into the corner, their bodies bruised and bleeding, their lungs scraping for air that seemed thinner by the second. Sheila's face was pale, slick with sweat and blood, her hand trembling as she tried to keep one last ward alive, the faint glow barely a flicker against the storm. Syloki's pistol clattered useless at her side, her knuckles raw from hitting the floor to dodge another onslaught. And still, she refused to fall silent. Her voice, cracked and desperate, strained against the Widow's shrieks. "Listen to me! Please—listen! You think no one can feel your pain, but I can. I can! Come and see mine! Come and see what it is to lose everything!" Her chest heaved, tears stinging her eyes, her body aching, but she forced the words out louder, more frantic. "If you're so desperate to be heard, then come—come share it with me!"

For a heartbeat, everything stopped. The glass, the rattling, the screaming—it all collapsed into silence so sudden it rang in Syloki's ears. The Painted Widow's form flickered once, twice, and then dissolved, veil and mask shredding into the air like smoke torn apart by wind. Syloki gasped, staggering to her knees, but before she could shout for Sheila, before she could even reach her, something hit her—not from outside, but from within. It felt like water, rushing, surging, not over her skin but through it, flooding her chest, her veins, her bones. She gasped, arching her back as her breath left her in a violent rush. It was ice and fire at once, a river tearing her apart from the inside. The Widow was inside her.

Her vision tore away from the wreckage of the house and opened into light. Bright daylight, harsh against her eyes, and when she blinked the blur away she was standing—not crouched, not bleeding—but upright, in this same house, only whole and alive. It was crowded. The air reeked of sweat and fear, of bodies pressed together too tightly. She saw them—twelve men and women, bound in a line against the wall, ropes biting into their wrists and throats. Some were silent with terror, some sobbed openly, their voices breaking like glass, and others whispered prayers into the damp air. Their chairs scraped the floorboards as they struggled, a low chorus of creaking wood and muffled cries.

Syloki turned her head and realized she wasn't bound. No ropes held her arms. She was standing on a small makeshift stage, an old rug thrown beneath her feet, the kind of stage built not for beauty but for spectacle. Her body trembled, and when she looked down, she realized her hands weren't her hands—they were thinner, paler, veined beneath translucent skin, adorned with rings she had never worn. Her throat closed when she caught sight of the black veil, heavy as shadow, trailing from her shoulders. She was the Painted Widow now, seeing through her eyes, feeling her trembling breath.

Beside her, on the stage floor, a man knelt. His hands were bound behind him, his shirt torn and damp with sweat, his face streaked with tears. He begged, voice hoarse, words spilling one over another in frantic rhythm. "Please—please, not my family, not them, take me instead, I'll do anything—please, for the love of the Saints, not them." His eyes darted toward the row of bound

figures, his wife and children among them, their faces pale with terror. He sobbed harder, choking on his own breath as he tried to throw himself forward, but the ropes yanked him still.

And then she saw him. The man standing a few paces away, clapping. His laughter filled the air, high and sharp, cutting through the cries of the bound. He leaned against the wall like it was all a show put on for his amusement, his smile wide, his eyes gleaming with unholy delight. He wasn't just watching—he was orchestrating, every clap like the cue for a twisted performance. Syloki's blood ran cold as the Widow's memory bled into her own. He was the Terror of Doskvol, the shadow behind every scream, the one who had chosen her grace and beauty, her poise on cabaret stages, and twisted it into this grotesque theatre. His laughter roared louder, the sound of doom, and Syloki felt her knees shake as the vision pressed harder into her skull, branding itself there forever.

The vision did not relent—it pressed harder, dragging Syloki deeper into the Painted Widow's last breaths. She stood frozen on that stage, her body rigid under the heavy veil, her throat tight with terror. The laughter rolled and rolled, echoing off the old plaster walls, bouncing in her skull until it was the only sound she could hear. But then, just as suddenly as it had started, it stopped. A terrible silence fell, thick enough to make her chest seize. The man's smile lingered, but the laughter withered away, and his voice filled the room instead. Smooth, venomous, a coil of threat beneath every syllable: "Why did you stop, my dear?" The way he said it was a blade pressed against the skin, mocking, daring her to flinch.

He rose from his seat with slow grace, his boots creaking against the boards, and every bound prisoner seemed to shrink back in their chairs as his shadow lengthened. His eyes locked on hers, a predator's gaze, and with each step closer the Widow's heart pounded louder, rattling the cage of her chest. She wanted to run, to scream, but her body was leaden, locked in place. It was only then that she felt the weight in her hand—a heavy thing, iron-cold and rough against her palm. She didn't know what it was, only that it was there, that it was hers. She gripped it until her knuckles blanched, and when he leaned close, when his breath brushed her veil, when his smile widened like a knife about to cut—she swung.

The blow cracked against his skull with a wet, awful sound, jarring her wrist, making her arm burn with the force of it. Blood splattered in a hot arc across her veil, pattering her cheek through the fabric, spilling down the man's shirt in a sudden, blooming stain. For a heartbeat, hope flashed through her, sharp and wild—she had struck him, she had broken the monster's grin. But then came the laughter again. Lower this time, guttural, unholy. It gurgled through the blood streaming down his face, his teeth flashing red as he straightened, his eyes alight with something even crueler. He didn't fall. He didn't falter. He only laughed.

The blow came from behind before she could swing again. A strike so brutal it felt like the world itself had caved in against her back. Bone cracked audibly, a chorus of shattering within her ribcage, and agony ripped through her body as she collapsed forward onto her knees. Her breath came sharp, cut off, every inhale jagged, burning. Her vision swam. She tried to scream, but only a ragged croak slipped past her lips. The pain was so immense it stole thought itself, reducing her to raw, twitching nerves. From above, she heard his voice again, addressing someone she couldn't see, each word jagged with mirth. "I thought you could keep her under the spell…" His tone turned into a growl of rage. "She is starting to resist it, the bitch."

More laughter followed, not just his but others, from the shadows, unseen, a chorus of glee at her defiance and her punishment. Then the first shot cracked. The bound man beside her—the one who had begged for mercy—jerked violently, his cry cut short as his body slumped forward, head rolling to the side, lifeless eyes wide with terror frozen in them forever. The line of prisoners erupted, their voices a wailing storm, screams and sobs tearing through the room like knives. Their chairs scraped and rattled, ropes strained, but none of them broke free.

Another shot split the air, louder this time, so close it seemed to burst inside her own skull. She flinched, but the pain that followed was not just fear—it was piercing, spreading. She inhaled sharply and felt it: wet, hot, the rush of blood filling her chest where air should have been. Her lungs drowned her from the inside out, each breath a desperate gulp that only dragged more crimson flood into her throat. She gurgled, choking, her body convulsing as her vision blurred. The veil clung to her lips, soaked through, heavy with her own blood. She gasped for air, but all she tasted was iron, all she swallowed was the sea of herself.

Her knees buckled, her body sagging forward, the stageboards rushing up to meet her face. The last thing she saw before darkness folded in was him—clapping again, slow, deliberate, his laughter swelling over the screams of the audience, a symphony of terror conducted in blood. And then everything sank, the world muffled in red, until there was nothing but the drowning.

Syloki fell to her knees, the floor pitching beneath her like the slope from her memory, and she let the sound out of her like a thing ripped free—ugly, raw, a keening that tasted of rust and old rain. The widow's fury pooled in the room, thick as oil, and it pressed against her ribs until Syloki could feel its heat searing through the thin fabric of her sleeves; she realized with a sick, astonished clarity that the cadence of that rage matched something she carried inside already, the same ragged edge of grieving anger that had hollowed her out long ago. A film of images unspooled in front of her eyes, sudden as a struck match, and she was dragged into them as if the ghost had shoved her through a mirror; the theater boards fell away and she was somewhere else entirely, somewhere bright and cruel where daylight did not soothe but exposed every wound. Her breath came in short, frightened pulls, but the memory moved faster than breath could follow—no polite edges, only stutters of motion and sound: the slap of boots on wet cobbles, the child's high keening, the man's hurried whispers that had once been comfort and became commands in the same breath. The air in her chest felt like a drum beaten under water as the past bled into the present, and she tasted iron on her tongue as if the world had always been a place where blood was the only honest currency.

They were running—she saw it in flashes—him and her, a man she had once loved, his hands rough and urgent on her elbow, her arms cradling a small bundle that squirmed and screamed, a two-year-old thrashing with the confusion of sleep interrupted and danger. The hill they reached was steep, a slick slope of mud and loose gravel that slid under their feet with treacherous ease; he shoved her forward with a force that felt like panic pretending to be courage, and she went, the baby alarming in her arms, its tiny fists clawing at her coat as if trying to hold on to something solid. As she slid, the world narrowed to the sound of the child's cry and the sting of stones against her palms, and then the shots began like distant crows, sharp and impossible; each one punctured the air with the cold certainty of death, and she heard them as if someone had cut the ropes of sunlight. She scrambled up the slope at the bottom, terror lending speed to her legs, and when she looked back the scene froze like a horror painted in motion: the man she'd trusted was collapsed on his knees, chest blown out in a dark, spreading bloom, and three silhouettes were moving toward him with the casual cruelty of men who had done this before. Fournier. My husband. My boy's father. This wasn't the Widow's memory — it was mine.

They did not hurry like people who might hope to be caught; they approached with the slow economy of those who expect no consequence. He didn't try to crawl, didn't plead—he was already a ragged puppet with too many holes, red seeping from his shirt like a betrayed sunrise. The shooters raised their weapons not as a last resort but as an affirmation, and then a volley of gunfire ripped the quiet open so utterly that the little child's scream cleaved the air into jagged pieces; the bullets chewed into flesh and turned a living body into something that slumped and then lay still, an ugly punctuation on the slope's curve. Syloki's vision stung with the spray of tiny particles—dirt and bone and blood—and she had the absurd, terrible clarity of seeing every hole the bullets made as they punched through the man, each impact a new line in the ledger of her

life. The three men finished as casually as men lighting cigars after a meal, glancing up at her with casual contempt as though they had merely disposed of refuse, and then they turned and walked away, leaving the hillside full of echoes and the small body sliding toward the ditch.

She screamed then, a raw, animal sound that had nothing in it like the practiced bravery she wore now; it was a promise torn from the gut, wet and immediate: she would remember their faces, she would store each angle of their mouths and the way their coats hung when they walked, and she vowed in that second with a purity that was almost holy that they would never forget the woman who had the look of fire in her eyes. The memory burned so bright she could almost feel it as a brand on her palm, the faces of the men seared into her mind like marks that could be called up at will, and that promise folded into her heartbeat—come hell or ghostlight, she would carve their names into the ledger of the city. Rage rose hot and methodical then, not the scattered, useless panic of the moment but a slow, building thing that hardened into purpose; the baby's wailing dwindled into a background tide, and she felt the shape of her life snap into a new alignment around that single axis of retribution. The air in the haunted room smelled suddenly like the slope—mud and oil and blood—and Syloki could feel the painted widow's old grief answering her own, a twin echo that made the present hum with a dangerous resonance.

Back on the floor, knees stinging against the old boards, Syloki's hands closed into fists until her nails ached and she could feel the phantom weight of that baby against her breast as if it were still there; the widow's presence thinned in the room as if temporarily sated by the rawness she'd offered, and for a shattered heartbeat Syloki tasted the widow's last breath on her own lips. The scream of the past faded into a hush that trembled with the memory of clapping hands and a laughing man, and the room around them seemed to hold its breath as if listening for what would come next. Her chest heaved with grief and a fierce, clear resolve—the kind that does not comfort but informs every step—and she pressed the memory into the seams of her bones so it would be a map to follow, a cold geometrical promise of return. She folded the names of the men into that vow and let it thicken into the only thing she trusted at that moment besides the touch of Sheila's blood-warmed hand on her arm: I remember you; I will find you; I will make sure you will never forget my face. That was a promise. I became a widow that day. My son became fatherless. And I have carried that wound like a brand ever since.

Syloki was still on her knees, shoulders jerking with sobs that clawed at her chest like broken glass. The vision had ripped her open, forced her to stare at the raw marrow of her grief, and though she had tried to bury it deep years ago, the wound bled fresh in her now. She remembered the faces of those men, the way their blood had splattered against her hands when she finally found them and tore their lives apart. She had reveled in it, smiling through their screams, and for a fleeting moment she had thought it would be enough. But her boy was already gone then, taken from her arms by the world that deemed her unfit, and no amount of vengeance had filled that hollow. She had lost him, and in losing him she had lost herself. The tears now came not just from the memory but from the cruel reminder that pain doesn't die, it just waits. It waits until someone—or something like the Widow—comes to pull it back into the light, to make her bleed again in the present.

The air around them was thick, vibrating with the Widow's grief, her presence seeping into every corner of the room like smoke trapped without an exit. She began speaking again, her voice cracking between wails and screams, broken lines that did not follow one another but landed like shards of glass. "He made me dance, and the fire was my stage," she cried, before her tone shifted into a venomous snarl. "You stood in the wings while he burned us. You watched, and you smiled." The accusation came sharp, directed at someone not in the room but near enough in spirit that Syloki's gut clenched. The Widow's shadow swept across the walls, elongated and clawed, and each syllable seemed to scrape against the beams above, filling the air with an unholy vibration.

Her voice lowered then, almost to a whisper, though the words still cut like daggers. “Barrowcleft burned because of him… because of him and the one who smiled beside him.” The way she said *the one who smiled* made Syloki’s skin crawl, like the very shape of the words was poison. She wanted to deny it, wanted to block her ears, but her intuition—the cursed gift the Sisters told her to always listen to—tightened in her belly. She did not understand it fully now, but she knew she would. These words were seeds, planted to grow into a truth later. The Terror of Doskvol. And someone else. Someone the Widow hated even more, maybe.

While the Widow raged, the room itself seemed to convulse. A mirror cracked across its face with no hand to touch it, glass raining onto the floor like sharp rain. Curtains flapped though the air was stagnant, and the rocking chair where the doll had sat groaned as though burdened by an unseen weight. Shelia, blood trickling from a fresh cut on her forehead, crawled across the boards with her chalk clenched tight. Her pale hands moved quickly, retracing the circle, her breath coming in ragged gasps, her blue eyes wild but determined. Each symbol came down shakier than the last, but she persisted, until the banishment runes were once again complete. She seized the doll, its glassy eyes glaring with their own ghostlight, and slammed it into the middle of the circle.

Syloki barely noticed, her eyes still glazed with tears, until Sheila’s trembling hand touched her shoulder. It wasn’t gentle—it was desperate, shaking, a call back from the depths of memory. “Sy,” Sheila whispered, her voice raw and urgent, “I need you. I need you *now*.” The words clawed their way through the fog of Syloki’s grief, dragging her half back into the moment. She blinked at her friend, then felt the weight in her coat pocket—the small flask of holy water. Sheila’s eyes darted down, wide and insistent, silently begging. Syloki’s fingers brushed the flask, her hand shaking as though it weighed a hundred pounds. Somewhere above them, the Widow screamed again, her wail rattling the beams until dust rained down like ash. The accusations still echoed: *you smiled… you stood beside him… Barrowcleft burned…* Syloki swallowed hard, trying to steady her breath, clutching the flask like it was the only rope left between her and the present.

Syloki forced herself to breathe, ragged and sharp, until the black haze of grief and visions peeled away from her mind. The urgency in Sheila’s trembling voice was the anchor, the only thing strong enough to drag her back to the present. She fumbled for the flask in her pocket, the cold glass biting into her palm, and pulled it free. Her hands shook as she uncapped it, but she did not hesitate. She tipped it over the doll, and every drop that fell hissed and sizzled, as though acid was burning through something unseen. The doll’s painted eyes glowed brighter, the seams of its wooden body groaning, until a faint, unnatural smoke coiled up from its tiny dress. Syloki lifted her chin and began to speak—not words she had memorized, not a script from her lessons, but something that rolled off her tongue like a song she had always known. Ancient syllables shaped themselves in her mouth, verses that felt older than the city itself. She spoke them once, a single thread of poetry woven from her heart: an invitation, a plea, asking the spirit to taste the calm within her and follow it out into the light. The room grew quieter, the walls no longer shaking, and the voices that had filled the air slowly thinned into silence.

For a moment, Syloki thought she might collapse. She let out a weak laugh, part relief, part disbelief that it had worked. Then her eyes flicked to the doorway, and her chest tightened with fresh irritation. Pamela was there, standing tall, arms crossed, her expression unreadable. She had been there all along, close enough to watch them nearly die, close enough to see Sheila bleed, close enough to see Syloki break—and yet she had not moved a finger. Syloki’s voice came out sharp and venomous, her tone dripping with bitter sarcasm. “Great help you were, Pamela.” The words echoed with a bite, sharper than the hiss of the holy water on the doll.

Pamela did not so much as flinch. If the jab cut her, she buried it deep under that icy mask she always wore. She stepped into the room, her eyes flicking between the doll, the runes, and the

two battered women before her. “This was a powerful spirit,” she said simply, her tone steady, almost detached. “You connected with her, Syloki. That was not technique, nor training—it was instinct. It was a dangerous gamble. I thought you were gone, consumed. But instead… you bridged her rage with your own.” She tilted her head slightly, the faintest shadow of acknowledgment in her gaze. “That connection was what calmed her long enough for the ritual to take hold. We have cleansed the doll. But that Widow…” her eyes lingered on the dark corners of the room, “…that Widow will return.”

Pamela extended a hand, graceful but cold, as though offering a formal courtesy rather than genuine care. “Come. Let’s go.”

Syloki’s jaw clenched, her pride and anger bristling too hot to accept the gesture. She ignored the hand entirely, shoving herself back onto unsteady feet with a stubborn growl in her throat. She turned immediately to Sheila, who was still slumped on the ground, her hands red with chalk dust and blood. Without hesitation, Syloki reached down, sliding her arm under Sheila’s shoulder and pulling her up with a grunt. “Got you, blue-eyes,” she muttered, voice softening with affection as Sheila leaned into her weight. She kept her back straight as she led her friend out of that cursed room, her body aching, her mind spinning, but her pride refusing to bend before Pamela’s silent stare.

The doll lay limp in Sheila’s hands, its glass eyes dull now, the strange shimmer that had once danced inside them gone. The runes on the floor still glowed faintly, fading like embers after a fire, leaving the air thick with smoke that wasn’t smoke, just the residue of something that had been pushed out of this world. Syloki let her shoulders sag, breath shaking in her chest as she leaned against the wall, trying to steady herself. Every muscle ached, her skin stung from cuts she hadn’t yet registered, and her mind still swam with scraps of voices that weren’t hers. For a long moment, the only sound was her ragged breathing and Sheila’s quiet murmur: “It’s over.” The words weren’t triumphant, just steady, like a rope tossed across a gap. Syloki looked at her and gave the smallest nod, letting the truth of it sink in. They were alive, the doll was clean, and the Widow had receded back into the house’s dark bones—for now.

Sheila’s hand found her arm, gentle but grounding, helping her stand when her knees threatened to give way. The contact was brief, almost cautious, but it meant more to Syloki than words could. Sheila wasn’t one for chatter—she didn’t joke, didn’t fill silence like Syloki always did—but in that moment, her quiet strength spoke louder than anything. Syloki let herself lean on her just enough to feel that weight, just enough to know she wasn’t alone. For once, she didn’t try to cover it with a quip. She just breathed, grateful.

Pamela didn’t say a word as they left the house, only glancing once over her shoulder, as if checking that the Widow hadn’t followed them out. Her steps were unhurried, hands folded neatly behind her back, as though the chaos inside hadn’t touched her at all. It was infuriating—and yet, somehow reassuring. Someone had to remain unmoved, even if it wasn’t kindness but calculation that kept her so cold. Syloki, cradling the empty flask in her pocket, wondered which it was.

When they reached the little house in Silkbend, the mother was already at the door, her eyes wild with sleepless worry. The girl was behind her, clinging to her skirt, face blotchy from crying. Sheila stepped forward and placed the doll carefully into the mother’s hands. It was just a doll now, lifeless wood and stitched cloth, no more dangerous than any trinket a child might tuck under her pillow. The girl’s breath hitched when she saw it, and for a moment she looked as though she might cry again—but this time it was different. She clutched the doll tight, then pushed it back into her mother’s arms, as though afraid to keep it close. Tears spilled down her cheeks, but they were cleaner tears, lighter, mingling loss with relief.

The mother knelt, arms folding around her daughter, whispering thanks between sobs. Her eyes shone as she looked up at the Sisters, gratitude written plain across her face even as words failed her. “You’ve given me my child back,” she managed, voice cracking. Sheila gave a small, polite bow of her head, Pamela remained a statue at the threshold, and Syloki forced a smile, one hand pressed against the ache in her ribs. “She’s safe now,” she said softly, meaning both the girl and herself, though only one of them needed to hear it. “The whispers are gone.”

As they turned to leave, the sound of the girl’s crying still lingered in Syloki’s ears. Not the haunted wail of possession, not the hysterics of obsession—but the very human sound of letting go. It should have been enough. It was enough, wasn’t it? And yet Syloki’s steps felt heavy as they walked back through the quiet streets, the shadows of the canal stretching long. The Widow’s words pressed against her chest like stones: accusations against Lira, hints of Barrowcleft, the echo of another smile lurking in the dark. She pushed them down, but they stayed. She had passed her first trial, but part of her couldn’t shake the feeling that she’d only just stepped onto the stage of something much larger—and much darker—than she was ready to face.

The manor loomed ahead like it always did, all shadow and silence, its tall windows glinting faintly in the lantern light as though watching their return. Inside, the warmth of polished wood and scented candles felt almost insulting after the raw cold of the haunted house. Syloki’s boots dragged against the marble floor, every step echoing too loudly. Lira was already waiting in the great hall, her hands folded neatly in front of her, her calm expression betraying nothing. Pamela spoke first, her voice clipped and detached, as though giving a report on the weather. “She endured,” she said simply, and nothing more. No praise, no elaboration. Just that word. Lira’s gaze lingered on Syloki a heartbeat longer, and the faintest smile touched her lips.

“Endurance,” Lira said softly, stepping closer, her voice velvet over steel. “That is the marrow of sisterhood. Not power, not skill, but the will to stand when others fall. You proved something tonight, Syloki.” The words should have warmed her, should have been balm after the bruises and cuts hidden under her clothes, but instead they felt like weights hung around her neck. She forced a smile, nodded when expected, even muttered a small “thank you.” But inside, the echo of the Widow’s rage still clawed at her ears. Endurance was one thing. What about truth? What about the accusations spat out like fire, accusing her new mistress of watching, smiling, while terror spread unchecked?

Pamela excused herself with her usual cold efficiency, vanishing down one of the manor’s long corridors without another glance. Sheila lingered just long enough to squeeze Syloki’s shoulder, a brief, wordless gesture that said more than anything Lira had spoken. Then she too was gone, leaving Syloki alone under Lira’s watchful eyes. The older woman tilted her head slightly, like a mother observing a child who’d taken her first unsteady steps. “You are one of us now,” Lira murmured. “Trust, Syloki. Trust is the bond that keeps us strong.”

Trust. The word rang hollow in her ears. She nodded anyway, lips tugging upward into a polite, obedient smile. Her heart, however, was not obedient. It twisted, restless, repeating the Widow’s voice in her mind, those words spat like venom: *You stood in the wings while he burned us. You watched, and you smiled.* Lira’s eyes never left hers, and for a fleeting second Syloki thought she saw something shift there—something hard and wounded, quickly smoothed away beneath the usual mask.

That night, alone in her chamber, Syloki sat at her desk with the little oil lamp flickering weakly against the gloom. She pulled out her diary, its leather cover already worn soft by her hands, the lock giving way with a quiet snap. The quill trembled between her fingers, not from exhaustion but from the tangle of thoughts she couldn’t pin down. She had faced a ghost tonight and walked away. She had seen violence and survived. But it wasn’t the fight that haunted her—it

was the Widow's words, and what they suggested about the woman now claiming to be her protector.

Her handwriting sprawled crookedly across the page, ink blotching in places where her hand pressed too hard. *The Painted Widow spoke of the terror. The man with the painted grin. And she turned her fury on Lira herself.* The words stared back at her, harsh and undeniable. She pressed her lips together, remembering the way Lira's tone had dipped, that sliver of something unspoken in her gaze. Could the Widow have been wrong? Or had Syloki just been blind to truths buried beneath layers of silk and smiles?

She wrote more, faster now, as though confessing to the page would keep the doubts from consuming her. *What did she see that night? What did Lira stand by and let happen? What is she hiding from us?* The scratches of the quill filled the silence of her room, the only anchor against the storm of questions unraveling inside her. She wanted to believe in the Gloam Sisters. She wanted to believe in this new chance, this strange, structured family. But ghosts didn't lie—not about pain. And the Painted Widow's pain had been too sharp, too real to ignore.

Closing the diary, Syloki pressed her forehead against the cool leather, breathing in the faint scent of ink. She blew out the lamp, letting the room drown in darkness. In the silence, she thought of the girl in Silkbend clutching her doll, freed at last. Of Sheila's hand on her shoulder. Of Pamela's cryptic watchfulness. And always, beneath it all, the echo of laughter she hadn't heard but could almost imagine—the laughter of the terror of Doskvol, and of whoever wore the painted grin. Sleep did not come easy. It never would again. And in that restless dark, Syloki felt the ache of loneliness more than ever. Sheila was kind, but she wasn't enough. What she needed was someone who could anchor her when her thoughts spun out, someone steady. She found herself wondering what Arthur was doing right now, and wishing, just for a moment, that she could talk to him.

Story: What Comes Next

The Twilight Lounge was a fog of coal smoke and cheap ale, the kind of air that clung to your coat long after you left. The place never changed—lamps sputtering with their weak glow, tables sticky with spills, the clamor of men and women trying to forget the city pressing down on them. Arthur had taken his usual corner, half-hidden in shadow, coat tossed beside him like an empty shell. The glass on the table glimmered faintly, filled with amber that caught the lamplight like a shard of fire, though he hadn't drunk nearly as much as he had intended. His fingers tapped once against the rim before stilling again, the gesture as unconscious as a heartbeat. His eyes remained fixed on it, though his thoughts weren't in the drink but far away, back to the words Silas had given him, back to the horror he hadn't seen but couldn't stop imagining. His face was drawn tight, every line of him wound as though bracing for something that would never end. The lounge carried on around him, but Arthur sat in the storm of his own silence, his grief sharpened into stillness.

The door opened with its familiar groan, letting in a rush of damp night air that stirred the haze. Arthur didn't need to look up; he recognized the rhythm of those footsteps, the pause of scanning eyes marking her arrival. Syloki's presence always moved differently from the rest—calculated, sharp, as though the room itself shifted to make space for her. When she spotted him, she didn't hesitate. Her boots cut a direct path toward his table, her coat swaying at her hips. He cursed himself for not leaving earlier, for sitting so long in that same cursed corner where he was easiest to find. She slid into the seat opposite him with the kind of casual familiarity that only came from persistence. "So here you are," she said, voice light, laced with something sharper underneath. Her eyes flicked to the glass. "You've been faithful to that corner, haven't you? Think the Lounge should start charging you rent."

Arthur gave the faintest grunt, not quite a laugh, not even close, just enough to show he'd heard her. His hand lingered on the glass, though he didn't lift it. Syloki leaned forward, studying the drink with a glimmer of mischief in her eye, the kind that came naturally to her even in places like this. "Please," she said, voice dropping into a playful groan, "don't make me drink that again. I hated it last time. Nearly choked. Let me order something more fruity before you drag me back into whatever swamp that is." She didn't wait for his permission, waving her hand to the barkeep. "Something bright. Something with actual flavor." Arthur's eyes flicked to her then, a quick glance that landed and moved away again like he couldn't afford to let it stay. He didn't rise to the bait, didn't tease her back. The silence after her joke pressed heavier than the joke itself. She covered the sting by leaning back, shrugging it off, though she remembered that night—snatching his drink, teasing him until he stopped. She remembered the small victory in his half-smile. Tonight there was nothing.

The barkeep dropped off her drink—some concoction of muddled berries and sweet liquor that glowed almost garishly against the gloom of the lounge. She lifted it, sniffed, and smiled faintly as if to reassure herself. "Much better," she muttered, taking a sip and setting it down with purpose. Arthur remained unmoved, gaze sliding back to his own glass, as though hers didn't exist. The silence stretched, and Syloki let it, watching him in the dim light. He looked the same as always—cold, coiled—but she saw it, the shadow of something more. His jaw too tight, his shoulders held rigid, his hands restless in ways his face refused to show. He was breaking, but in the quiet, invisible ways that left no pieces on the floor. She let out a slow sigh, her humor thinning into honesty. "Arthur," she said, her voice lower, softer, carrying the weight she hadn't wanted to bring to the table. "I heard the other sisters talking about him. About the Cypher who died."

Arthur's head lifted slightly, his eyes cutting to hers with the force of a blade unsheathed. "Adrian," he corrected, the name falling heavy between them. "His name was Adrian Blackwood." The sharpness wasn't for her, but the weight of the words cracked something in him as he spoke them. Syloki lowered her gaze briefly, then repeated it, quieter, like a prayer. "Adrian." She let the name sit for a moment, heavy as it deserved, before she asked, "How did it happen?" She already knew she shouldn't have, but the question left her before she could stop it. Arthur leaned back in the booth, fingers curling tight against the table's edge, every motion measured. When he spoke, it was with that soldier's detachment he leaned on when words threatened to break him. "Silas was there. At the Black Marrow. Pennwright paraded Adrian on a stage… locked him in a glass box. They called it a demonstration."

Syloki froze, her drink halfway to her lips. "A demonstration?" she echoed, disbelief slipping in. Arthur's eyes flicked away, fixed on some point in the shadows. His voice stayed clipped, but the spaces between each sentence carried the weight of what he wouldn't let himself feel. "They called it Ladher. A weapon. They filled the box with smoke… poison. The ape went first, convulsing, slamming itself to pieces against the walls. Adrian lasted longer. He screamed. Coughed blood. His eyes…" His hand clenched until his knuckles went white, forcing himself to release it before the wood splintered beneath his grip. "They let him die while the crowd bid for the right to own that horror. And Silas—he sat and watched. He had no choice." His words fell flat, heavy, the rhythm of someone reciting facts to stop them from becoming feelings.

Syloki sat forward, her humor stripped bare, her voice soft and steady in its absence. "I'm sorry," she said, and she meant it. No jest, no shield of sarcasm. Her hand shifted slightly across the table, not quite reaching, but close enough to suggest it. Arthur's gaze flicked toward it, then away, his throat working as he swallowed down something he refused to release. "Don't," he muttered. "If I let it out now, it won't stop." His words were low, frayed at the edges, but the control in them was iron. He didn't weep, didn't tremble, but the cracks were there—small, sharp, visible to someone who refused to look away. Syloki didn't push. Instead, she sat back, folded her arms, her eyes fixed on him with a steadiness that told him she wasn't going anywhere, not yet.

The air pressed down heavier, but Syloki shifted, changing the weight with deliberate force. She lifted her chin, her tone changing, sharper, not pleading but declaring. "I've joined the Gloam Sisters," she said suddenly, the words a stone thrown into still water. Arthur blinked, his eyes snapping back to her, surprise cutting through the fog of grief. "You what?" he asked, the question short, sharp, disbelief carrying in the syllables. She didn't flinch under it, didn't break her gaze. "I'm with them now. Learning. Training. Becoming more than I was." The glass between them gleamed, but Arthur's hand didn't reach for it. He stared at her, the weight of her words pushing aside even the grief that had owned him moments before.

Arthur leaned back in his seat, his eyes narrowing at her words. The dim light caught on the edge of his glass, casting a faint shimmer across the table, but he didn't touch it. "The Gloam Sisters," he repeated, as though tasting the words, measuring them like something poisonous. "You think that's wise?" His tone was not mocking but blunt, sharpened by caution. "People don't walk away from them. Their power is real, yes, but so is their hold. They're feared for a reason, Syloki. Their reputation isn't some bedtime story." His gaze stayed steady, unblinking, like he was testing her resolve. He had seen too many alliances end in blood. She leaned forward, lips quirking with a wry half-smile that didn't reach her eyes. "And yet here I am. Alive. Learning. Stronger than I was a month ago." Her voice carried a conviction that didn't quite mask the undercurrent of unease.

Arthur's hand lifted, dragging across the stubble along his jaw, a slow movement that betrayed his thoughts. "Stronger, maybe. But their power comes at a cost. It always does." His voice softened, almost reluctantly. "I've watched too many sell themselves for scraps of safety. You

don’t strike me as the type to trade your freedom.” Syloki chuckled at that, though it came out thin. “Oh, don’t get me wrong. I still complain plenty.” Her eyes darted to the side before she let it slip, careless in her chatter. “This is the first time they’ve let me out since I joined.” The words hung in the air, heavier than she intended. Arthur’s brows lifted slightly, a quiet flicker of concern breaking his mask. She blinked, realizing too late what she’d said, then shrugged as if to dismiss it. “Don’t give me that look. I came here because I knew you’d be here. That’s all.” Her voice dipped then, uncharacteristically shy. “I wanted to be here for you.”

The admission landed heavier than any jest could have. Arthur let out a slow breath through his nose, studying her as if seeing her from a new angle. He could feel the ache in his chest tighten, that iron weight he’d been forcing down since the news of Adrian, since Silas’s account of it. He didn’t want comfort—he didn’t trust it—but her words cut through regardless. He shook his head faintly, as though warding off something he didn’t want to feel. “Syloki…” His voice trailed, caught between gratitude and warning. She smirked softly, lifting her fruity drink and swirling it idly, though her eyes never left his. “Don’t worry. I won’t start holding your hand or anything. But someone has to check you haven’t drowned yourself yet.” She tried to turn it back to humor, but Arthur saw the truth beneath it—her worry was real, unpolished, and it unsettled him more than the drink in front of him ever could.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The Lounge roared around them—workers shouting, mugs clattering, laughter breaking into coughing—but at their booth, the world had gone quiet. Arthur’s thoughts flicked to Adrian again, to the glass box and the smoke, to Silas’s voice describing it all in brutal detail. His fists curled against the table, but he forced them to relax, to keep his calm mask intact. Syloki tilted her head slightly, studying him, then said, “You’re always so damn still. I can practically hear you screaming behind your eyes.” He gave a humorless huff of breath, not quite a laugh. “Stillness is survival.” She leaned back, crossing her arms. “And survival’s not the same as living. Don’t let Doskvol swallow you whole, Arthur. It’s already chewing on everyone else.” The words came sharp, almost reckless, and she blinked as though realizing how far she’d pushed. But she didn’t take them back.

Arthur turned his gaze to her, and for a heartbeat, the air between them seemed taut, stretched thin by things neither would say aloud. Finally, he leaned forward, his voice lower now. “You chose the Sisters. Maybe it will make you stronger. Maybe it will break you. Just remember that some cages have velvet walls.” His words carried a weight, not scolding but warning, etched with hard experience. Syloki didn’t flinch, though her mouth tightened at the edges. “Maybe so. But it’s my cage to step into, isn’t it? And if I’m going to be bound to anyone, at least they make me stronger. At least they teach me something. Do you know what it feels like to finally not be weak in this city?” Her eyes gleamed in the dim light, fierce with conviction. Arthur studied her for a long moment before answering, “Yes. I know. And I also know what it costs to keep it.”

The words fell between them like coals, glowing but dangerous to touch. Syloki looked away, her finger tracing the rim of her glass, her posture tight with stubborn pride. Arthur leaned back, watching her, weighing his next words carefully. Finally, she broke the silence again, her tone quieter now. “So what’s next for you, then? After… all this?” She didn’t say Adrian’s name this time, but the shadow of it still lingered. Arthur’s eyes hardened, his face settling into that cold stillness again. “What’s next?” he repeated, the words almost tasting bitter. “I know where I’m going. I know what I have to do. That’s all that matters.” His tone was clipped, cryptic, a door shut before she could see inside. Syloki frowned faintly, searching his face for more, but he offered nothing further. He wasn’t ready to put it into words, not yet.

Arthur pushed his chair back, the wood scraping against the floor, breaking the spell of their booth. He stood, pulling his coat from where it lay crumpled and slinging it over his shoulders in one fluid motion. His shadow stretched long across the table, brushing against Syloki’s face in the lamplight. For a heartbeat, he looked down at her—her eyes bright with worry, her

expression softer than she wanted it to be. He almost said something, almost let the mask crack, but instead he only shook his head faintly. “Don’t let them consume you,” he muttered, more to the air than to her, before turning away. His steps were steady, purposeful, each stride toward the door weighted with grim resolve. Syloki watched him go, lips pressed tight, the fruity drink untouched at her elbow. As the door shut behind him and the night swallowed him, she sat alone in the booth, staring after him, wondering if either of them would survive the choices they had just confessed.

Chapter 03: **Ash and Iron**

Coalbridge was never kind at sunset. The district bled smoke instead of color, its skyline a ragged mouth of brick and iron that chewed on the dying light until it spat back only soot. Stacks rose like crooked teeth against the dimming sky, coughing coal ash into the damp air until even the clouds turned black around the edges. The bridges hung low and heavy, their stone bellies streaked with years of grime, their underpasses slick with oil and shadow. Every sound here carried weight—metal groaning in its hinges, gears grinding in rust, the faint hiss of steam that seemed less like breath and more like the death rattle of an exhausted machine. The streets below were narrower than a coffin lid, hemmed in by walls that sweated with condensation and grime, the kind of damp that crawled beneath collars and settled in bones. To walk Coalbridge was to walk inside the belly of a dying beast, each step reminding you that you lived at its mercy, and the beast was starving.

The rooftops were no safer. Shingles shifted underfoot with a sigh, nails bent and splintered from decades of weather, while chimneys leaned into one another like drunks who had forgotten which way was home. Here, above the street, the wind carried the smell of coal smoke and river salt, bitter on the tongue, catching in the throat until every breath felt like swallowing soot. From this vantage, the district unfolded in its grim entirety—rows upon rows of factories with their shattered windows glowing faintly from interior forges, alleyways that forked like veins into the dark, and always that river of smoke rising, twisting itself into the fading sky like a prayer no god had ever answered. Doskvol did not sleep, and Coalbridge least of all; even in this hour, the clang of distant hammer on iron and the churn of steam engines rattled like a second heartbeat beneath the cobblestones.

Arthur crouched on the edge of a sagging roof, coat pulled tight against the cold breeze that prowled across the tiles. The binoculars were cold in his hands, brass edges biting at his gloves as he pressed them to his eyes. Through their lenses, the world narrowed into sharp detail—the squat bulk of the building they watched, heavy walls lined with iron struts, narrow windows shuttered from the inside. The Veil of Shadows. No sign marked it, but its silence was louder than the factories that roared on either side. While the other buildings screamed with industry, this one held its breath, tucked into the spine of Coalbridge like a tumor waiting to be cut out. Arthur lowered the binoculars for a moment, letting the view slip into the corner of his vision, the weight of it settling on him heavier than the fog.

Beside him, Silas knelt with that stillness of his—thoughtful, grave, as if the whole city were laid out before him in some private pattern only he could see. His bulk loomed against the dim light, hands clasped loosely over his knees, eyes fixed not on the building itself but on the horizon beyond, where the last shards of daylight tangled with smoke. The look on his face was one Arthur knew too well, the look of a man hearing something deeper than sound, a rhythm in the city's pulse that spoke of trouble long before it arrived. He hadn't said a word since they'd taken their position, but Arthur didn't need him to. That kind of silence always spoke loud enough.

Behind them, Pierre shifted his weight for the third time in as many minutes. The boy wasn't green anymore—not after the scraps they'd dragged him through—but he still carried that restless edge that made noise where silence should live. His boots scuffed against the tiles, his fingers worrying the strap of his satchel, and every small fidget grated against the quiet like nails dragged over slate. Arthur didn't turn to look, but he could hear it in every twitch and scrape: the boy's nerves were spilling into the night. The city had a way of grinding those nerves down until only stone remained, but Pierre wasn't there yet. Maybe he never would be.

The other one—Brand, the newer of the two—stood a pace behind, tall but coiled tight, as if he hadn't yet decided whether to spring forward or backward. He was quiet where Pierre was restless, his silence sharp-edged, but Arthur caught the faint tremor in his breath when the wind shifted and rattled the loose slates. His hand rested too close to the knife at his belt, fingers brushing it like a charm against fear, and his eyes darted from shadow to shadow as if expecting each to crack open and swallow them whole. It was the kind of fear a man could live with if he learned to keep it buried. If not, the city would eat him by morning.

Arthur dragged the binoculars back up, lenses narrowing once more on the Veil. A pair of guards paced the perimeter, their movements mechanical, their steps too even to be casual. They carried lanterns that burned weak and yellow, but the light didn't matter; the Circle's zealots had no need of it. They knew their paths as if they'd been burned into their bones, and they walked them with the kind of devotion that only men willing to die for an order possessed. Arthur studied their faces—or what little could be seen in the glow of the lanterns—and found no tattoos, no sigils, nothing to mark them but the hard line of faith in their eyes. He muttered under his breath, though no one heard it: "Flame doesn't need ink when it's carved into the marrow."

The wind shifted again, carrying the sound of clanging steel from the factories nearby, the hiss of valves venting steam, the faint murmur of voices too distant to name. But around the Veil itself, that silence held fast, a bubble of calm pressed against the city's noise. It was wrong. Too clean, too deliberate. Arthur felt the hairs along his arms lift beneath the coat, the instinct that whispered of traps laid and teeth waiting to close. The city was alive tonight, a beast restless in its chains, and Coalbridge was its throat. Every breath Arthur took tasted of smoke and iron, and each exhale felt like surrender to the weight pressing down on them.

And still, the sun slid lower, its last light smothered by the city's smoke until only a dull glow clung to the horizon. Darkness was coming fast, draping itself over Coalbridge like a black shroud, and the Veil of Shadows stood waiting within it, silent and sure, as if daring them to step closer. Arthur let the binoculars fall to rest against his chest, the strap tugging faint against his neck, and he exhaled slowly, his breath vanishing into the fog. Doskvol had always been a character in its own right, but tonight it felt less like a stage and more like a witness, silent and watchful, ready to judge the men who crept along its rooftops toward damnation.

Arthur kept his eyes on the Veil below, its walls drinking up the dusk like it was built to swallow the sun itself, but his voice cut sideways, sharp and low. "Pierre. Tell me what we brought." The boy startled at the sudden order, straightened his back like a cadet under review, and fumbled at the satchel strap he'd been worrying for the last half hour. "Right," he muttered, more to himself than to anyone else, before pulling the bag onto his lap and beginning the litany. "Standard kit—grappling hooks, two coils of line, chalk sticks for marking. Three smoke vials, four crawlies." He dug one out, the thing's brass legs twitching with faint clockwork hum, and set it on the tiles where it flexed as if impatient. "Foam grenades, two of them. And, uh… new issue from Lannic. 'Earworms,' he called them. Little discs, you set them on a wall and they pick up sound from the other side—click once to listen, click twice to burn the recording into wax. Oh, and… 'Blinkers.' Throw one down and it'll strobe so bright it blinds everyone looking. Meant for retreat." His fingers danced nervously over each item as he named it, like he was trying to reassure himself the tools were real, not just words.

Arthur reached down, plucked one of the crawlies between his fingers, its mechanical legs writhing against his glove as if alive. He held it up, brass body glinting with the last scraps of daylight, and flicked his gaze to Pierre. "Tell me." The boy swallowed, wetting his lips. "That one's rigged for distraction. Loudest noise it can make is a boiler release whistle. Good for pulling guards from a post." Arthur rolled it once in his palm, then set it back with deliberate care, his eyes still hard on Pierre. "And the Blinker?" Pierre fumbled for the small brass tube capped with glass. "Three-second delay. Toss and turn away unless you want to blind yourself.

Short battery—don't waste it." Arthur gave the faintest nod, a flicker of approval beneath the steel of his face, before tucking his hands back into his coat. He didn't praise, didn't scold. He just listened, judged, and filed the answers away.

From the open air above came the sound of wings, the low rush of feathers cutting through the coal smoke. Silas lifted his head without looking, arm extending like he'd known exactly where the bird would land. The crow dropped from the dark like a piece of it had broken free, claws gripping Silas's leather bracer as if it belonged there. Its head twitched, beak clacking once, eyes reflecting pinpricks of light as Silas leaned in. He didn't speak to it aloud, just tilted his head slightly, as though listening to a sound only he could hear. After a long pause, he murmured, "Patrol of four. Twenty steps between them. One inside with a lantern who doesn't leave his post. Two more on rotation at the east wall. Discipline's tight. Place is locked down harder than it looks." His voice carried no surprise, only confirmation, like he'd expected no less from zealots willing to bleed out in the dirt for their creed.

Behind them, Arthur caught the low murmur of whispering. Brand leaned closer to Pierre, voice hushed, careful not to rise above the rattle of the wind. "What's with the bird?" Pierre glanced at Silas, then at the crow perched like an omen, and lowered his reply to match. "No one really knows. He's had it for years. Says it's not trained—it just comes back, always. Some think it's spirit work. Some say he just feeds it better than anyone else. Either way… it listens." Brand's brow furrowed, the faint crease of a man trying to fit sense into nonsense, but he let the matter drop. Arthur heard it all, every syllable slipping through the fog like smoke, but he didn't interrupt. Let the boys wonder. Doskvol was full of strange bonds. This one happened to work in their favor.

Arthur drew a slow breath, his eyes dragging back to the Veil, the building that sat like a shrine at the heart of this district. To the Circle, Coalbridge wasn't just territory. It was scripture. Factories were their temples, smoke their incense, and fire the cleansing hymn they swore by. They saw the grinding gears and molten forges as proof of their creed—that only through destruction and heat could the world be purified. He could almost hear their sermons carried on the wind, the promise that Doskvol itself was filth that must be burned away. He clenched his jaw, lowered the binoculars, and rubbed at the stubble rasping against his palm. Fanatics never built temples without intending to bury someone in them.

Pierre, nervous and restless, broke the quiet with a weak attempt at humor. "Maybe we just wait for them to come out and light themselves on fire, save us the trouble." His laugh was thin, too quick, vanishing into the night before it could take shape. The crow turned its head sharply, as though even the bird disapproved. Silas cut his gaze to the boy, his voice like gravel ground under boot. "This isn't a drill, Pierre. You want to joke, do it back at the Den. Not here." The rebuke landed hard, and Pierre ducked his head, lips pressing tight, his hands fumbling to repack the crawlies into their box.

Arthur let the silence sit for a beat longer before speaking, his tone flat, iron steady. "Listen to him. No heroics tonight. We're not here to start a war, we're here for answers. You see a chance to fight, you choke it down. You see a chance to run, you take it. Our job is information—nothing else." His gaze swept across them all, from Pierre's hunched shoulders to Brand's white-knuckled grip on his knife, and finally to Silas, steady as ever with the crow shifting faintly on his arm. "We walk in shadows, or we don't walk out." He let the words hang there, cold as the wind slipping off the chimneys, and for a moment, even the noise of the factories seemed to hush.

Arthur adjusted the strap of his satchel across his shoulder, the weight of the gear inside a reminder of what they carried into the lion's den. His eyes narrowed on the Veil's walls, dark stone gleaming faintly under the orange smear of the setting sun. He reminded himself why they

were here, why the risk was worth it—because somewhere in that building, behind zealot patrols and false walls, the Circle had been stockpiling. Rumor said it wasn't just crates of arms and stolen contraband, but prototypes, fragments of the same nightmare that had killed Adrian. Arthur had given the thing a name to make it easier to spit out—the Ladher Release Mechanism, the LRM prototype. He didn't like the way it rolled off the tongue, too clean for something so foul, but it was better than letting the memory of Adrian's convulsions burn through his mind raw. They needed plans, schematics, anything to understand how it worked before they ever faced it again. Confrontation without knowledge was suicide, and tonight was no place to gamble with lives—especially not with the two fresh faces at his back.

The group moved like a shadow spilling off the roof, their boots gripping on slate tiles slick with soot and damp. Arthur led, as always, every motion measured, every foothold tested before his weight shifted. Silas followed close, silent as his crow, his eyes always sweeping ahead, reading the rhythm of guard rotations in the shifting lantern lights below. Behind them, Pierre and Brand descended more awkwardly, hands trembling slightly against the ropes, nerves betraying them in every hitch of breath. Arthur didn't look back, but he could hear them—the scrape of boots, the small clatter of gear knocked against a wall. Every sound was a reminder of their inexperience, a reminder that one mistake here wouldn't just kill them, it would put them all in the ground. He gritted his teeth and pushed forward, because hesitation was as deadly as noise.

At the alley's edge, they landed one by one, shadows swallowed by deeper shadows. The air was thick here, heavy with the stink of coal smoke and tar, the streets slick with oil where wagons had leaked black trails. Arthur crouched low, pressed his back to the damp wall, and scanned the yard beyond. Lanterns burned in careful lines, circles of light swaying with the steps of patrols, each glow revealing more crates stamped with the Circle's burning globe sigil. Not Pennwright's mark—never his—but the Circle's own. Fanatics marking their faith like priests marking scripture. Arthur's lips pressed thin, jaw locking at the sight. To them, this wasn't smuggling. This was ritual. Every crate, every lock, every secret hidden here was another sermon in their gospel of fire.

He turned, catching Silas's steady gaze, the unspoken calculation passing between them. Silas dipped his head once, eyes flicking to the rookies before returning to Arthur. They didn't need words—the warning was written there: don't let them slip, don't let them die. Arthur gave the faintest nod, a silent pact sealed. He turned back to Pierre and Brand, who were pressed tight into the gloom, their breathing quick. Arthur's voice was a whisper of gravel, sharp enough to cut through their panic. "Stay on my heels. No chatter. If you lose sight of me, you stop. Understand?" Pierre nodded too fast, his hand fumbling for the strap across his chest. Brand managed a tighter nod, jaw set but eyes betraying the churn of nerves beneath. Arthur looked at them both a beat longer, imprinting the shape of their faces in his mind. He had no intention of adding them to the list of ghosts already following him.

They slipped across the yard like shadows dodging lantern light, crouching low as the guards marched their practiced patterns. Each step was timed, every movement threaded between the beats of footsteps and the crack of boots against stone. Arthur's hand signaled once, sharp and clean, and they froze as a pair of zealots passed close, their murmurs carrying in the air—half-prayers, half-orders. Arthur caught the tone, recognized the cadence of belief twisted into duty, and his chest tightened. He knew men like that wouldn't hesitate to die if it meant dragging their enemy down with them. He could almost hear their faith like a drum, beating in their veins as they walked on, leaving silence in their wake. Only then did Arthur move again, sliding forward, the others falling into step behind.

The walls of the Veil loomed higher with each yard, black stone lit with faint runes carved by hands long since dust. To the Circle, this place wasn't just a warehouse. It was sacred. It had

the weight of a temple and the silence of a tomb. Arthur thought about that as they crouched behind a stack of crates, his breath low and steady. This wasn't just about weapons. This was about belief, about zealotry sharpened into steel. He thought of the LRM again, of Adrian's screams filling a box while men in fine coats raised hands to bid. He reminded himself that every step closer tonight was one step closer to making sure no one else died that way. They couldn't stop the fire yet—but maybe they could learn how to douse it before it spread.

Arthur motioned them toward the side wall, where shadows lay deepest, their path drawn by the setting sun bleeding across the rooftops. The light fell sharp and red, casting long, skeletal silhouettes across the ground, the city itself seeming to bend and twist in the dying glow. Above them, the crow circled once, a silent signal, before winging off into the darkening sky. Arthur took one last breath, then led them forward into the heart of the Veil, the sun sinking behind them as if the day itself was retreating from what they were about to face.

They moved in silence, pressed low against the damp stone, their shadows swallowed by the greater shadows that pooled in the yard. Every step was deliberate—heel to toe, rolling across the balls of their feet so the crunch of gravel or snap of grit never carried. Arthur led them with small motions of his hand, a flick to freeze, a curl to move, each gesture as natural as breath to him. His eyes traced the rhythm of the guards, the swing of lanterns that carved brief tunnels of light across the dark. The Circle patrols walked like zealots in prayer, firebomb satchels clinking faintly against their thighs, long knives catching the orange gleam of the lanterns. Their lips moved in unison, chanting fragments of scripture to their unseen flame. The sound of it scraped at Arthur's nerves, too soft to be called singing, too harsh to be called murmuring, a cadence that sounded more like an oath with every passing patrol. Pierre's breath hitched behind him, and he leaned in close, whispering just enough for Arthur to catch. "This place is heavily guarded…" Arthur didn't turn, didn't respond, but the boy wasn't wrong. The Veil breathed like a fortress.

It was Silas who replied, his voice a rasp carried only on the edge of air. "Feels light," he said, eyes narrowing at the gaps in the patrol. "This place should be crawling." Arthur's gaze flicked toward him, catching the shadow of suspicion etched across Silas's face. He understood. If the Circle truly believed this was their temple, their holy vault, then why did the night feel so thin? Why did the gaps open so cleanly? Arthur's jaw tightened, but he gave no answer. They pressed on, slipping between crates stacked high, the burning globe sigil painted bold on their flanks. The smell of tar and oiled wood filled their noses, sharp enough to sting. Ahead, a single soldier leaned lazily against the wall, muttering the scripture with half a heart, his hand resting on the strap of his firebomb satchel. Arthur lifted his hand, signaling stillness. One of the crawlies was drawn from his pack, its brass legs clicking softly as he wound it, and he set it down. The little spider whirred, eyes glowing faint blue as it scuttled into the open. The zealot's gaze snapped down at the noise, and just as he stepped forward to stomp it, the device hissed and unleashed a flash—brilliant light bursting like lightning. The soldier gasped, blinded, and Arthur was already on him, hand clamping his mouth, knife pressing cold against his throat. The man sagged before he ever had time to cry out, his body dragged silently into the shadow of the crates.

The boys had frozen mid-breath, their eyes wide as Arthur reappeared, his hands clean, his movements already folding back into the silence of their march. He signed to move, but Pierre hesitated, his boots scuffing on loose stone, the sound carrying like thunder to Arthur's ears. Two patrolling zealots turned, lanterns swinging, their chants breaking off mid-word. Arthur's hand shot back, gripping Pierre's collar, and he yanked him down so hard the boy nearly choked. Brand shifted too late, his elbow scraping the crate's edge, and Arthur cursed inwardly. The guards were moving closer, light blooming across the yard. Arthur shoved the foam grenade into Pierre's hand and whispered low, "Now." The boy's fingers fumbled, but he hurled it at the ground between them and the guards. A hiss erupted as thick white foam spread in a

sudden wall, swallowing the noise, swallowing the light. The zealots stumbled against it, cursing, voices muffled by the sudden growth. Arthur pressed the boys low and dragged them sideways, out of the lantern's arc, hearts pounding in the heavy dark. When the patrol passed, muttering of tricks and ghosts, Arthur didn't let himself breathe until the light faded fully.

His fingers moved sharp in the gloom, hand signals quick and decisive. They would split. Silas caught his gaze, and in that wordless exchange, the decision was sealed. Silas would take Brand, the steadier of the two rookies, and circle wide through the eastern shadows. Arthur would take Pierre, still shaky but capable, and head for the western wall where an unlit window offered their best chance in. Silas dipped his head once, then melted into the dark with Brand trailing close, the crow wheeling above them as if tied to his will. Arthur placed a hand briefly on Pierre's shoulder, grounding him, then motioned forward. The boy's face was pale in the half-light, but he followed.

The wall loomed before them, slick with soot, its stones cold under Arthur's gloved hand as he tested the line. Pierre uncoiled his grappling hook, the steel catching faint orange from the nearest lantern, and Arthur signaled for silence. Timing was everything—the patrol's steps, the swing of light, the beat of their own hearts. They waited, crouched in the stillness, until the guards turned their backs. Arthur launched his line first, the hook clattering faintly before catching. Smooth. Clean. He hauled himself up without hesitation, body pressed flat, movements silent. Pierre followed, but his hands shook, the hook slipping against the stone. The clatter rang sharper than it was, but to Arthur's ear it might as well have been a scream. He snapped his gaze down, catching Pierre's panic as the boy fumbled to fix it.

Arthur's blood surged cold. He hissed a single word through his teeth—"Focus"—and the boy froze. Arthur dropped low, one boot braced against the sill, one arm reaching down. "Now," he mouthed. Pierre steadied his hands, teeth clenched, and set the hook again. This time it caught, holding fast. He climbed, breath ragged, body pressed tight against the wall. Arthur's hand was there when he reached the ledge, gripping his wrist and hauling him in before the lantern's glow returned. They collapsed together on the narrow sill, Pierre's breath loud in the stillness, Arthur's gaze cutting sharp as steel. "No more mistakes," Arthur whispered, voice low and edged. Pierre nodded fast, too fast, and Arthur's hand lingered a moment before he let go. They were inside now, shadows within shadows, and the real work had only begun.

The air inside the Veil was thick, weighted with coal smoke and the sour tang of scorched oil, every breath tasting faintly of iron. Arthur pressed himself to the stone, cold damp seeping through his coat, and let the shadows cover him like another skin. Beside him Pierre crouched low, shoulders rising and falling too fast, his breath coming in short, jagged pulls that fogged the dim light before vanishing. Arthur laid two fingers against the boy's shoulder, firm enough to be felt through the tension quivering there, and kept them until the rhythm slowed. His voice came low, pitched for the shadows, rough-edged but meant to anchor. "Breathe steady. In through the nose. Hold it. Let it out quiet. Again. Match me."

Pierre tried, but his hands shook against his knees, the tremor betraying him even in the dark. Arthur's eyes narrowed. "Talk. Why are you unraveling? This isn't green nerves—you've crawled alleys with me before." His tone held no softness, only the weight of expectation, the kind that forced truth. Pierre swallowed, eyes darting once toward the far corridor before dropping back to the stone. His whisper cracked, fragile as a thread. "Last time, with you. I got shot. I felt the blood pour out—I thought I was gone. I still feel it sometimes, the weight, the cold. Every time I hear boots scrape stone, I think it's coming back. That this time I won't crawl out." His jaw clenched, trying to choke the words back, but they spilled anyway, a knot of fear that had been waiting to snap.

Arthur’s chest tightened at the memory—but he didn’t let it bleed into his face. His grip on the boy’s shoulder grew heavier, grounding. “You’re not dead, Pierre. You’re standing here, right now, with lungs still full and hands still sharp enough to hold steel. That wound isn’t a chain. It’s a scar, and scars are reminders that you lived through worse than this. You think the Circle cares that you bled once? They don’t. They’ll only care if you bleed again because you froze.” His words were cold, but not cruel—they were steel being hammered into shape.

Pierre’s eyes lifted, wide with the panic still buzzing under his ribs, but Arthur leaned closer, his own gaze cutting sharp through the dim glow. “You want the fear gone? Too bad. It won’t go. You learn to shape it. You keep it in your hands, not in your head. That shaking in your chest? You turn it into focus. That noise in your skull? You turn it into timing. That’s how you live through a second night when the first one already tried to kill you.” His tone dipped lower, the weight of command pressed into every word. “The only way out is through.”

The boy’s breathing slowed, less ragged now, his shoulders settling into a steadier line. Arthur eased his hand away, but his voice struck sharper, sealing the thought in iron. “Lannic put you here because he trusts you not to fall apart. I’m not babysitting a ghost. You keep your head clear, your hands steady, and you move when I move. That’s how you walk out of here with your blood still inside you.” The words carved themselves deep, enough that Arthur saw Pierre’s trembling ease into stillness, the boy’s jaw setting into something harder, more resolved.

Arthur gave the faintest nod, his own breath slow, controlled. “Good. That’s better. Remember—no heroics, no panic. You follow me, and you’ll be fine. Lose your grip, and you’ll drag us both into the fire.” Pierre drew a breath, steadier this time, the whisper that came out low but certain. “I won’t break again, Arthur. I promise.” Arthur’s lips twitched, more grim than kind, but it was enough. “See that you don’t.” He adjusted the strap across his chest, eyes flicking to the corridor ahead where the braziers burned low. Then, with Pierre steadied at his side, Arthur pushed deeper into the Veil, where shadows coiled like smoke and every heartbeat carried the weight of silence.

The further they pressed into the Veil, the air thickened until every breath tasted of smoke and iron. The walls seemed to sweat with it, damp stone bleeding rivulets that carried the stink of coal ash and old incense, the herbs burned down to bitter ghosts in the air. Arthur’s boots found silence against the floorboards, each step measured like the tick of a clock, while Pierre crouched beside him, jaw set tight with the concentration Arthur had forced into him earlier. The faint shimmer of wards crawled across the ground like frost patterns, symbols etched in ash and copper that hummed with a low, hungry resonance. Arthur motioned sharply, but Pierre had already seen them. The boy’s fingers worked carefully, sprinkling a dust that broke the sigils’ balance, the shimmer dying into dull lines before it could flare. A faint sigh of released tension left Arthur’s chest, and he pressed onward, his hand brushing the hilt at his belt as if to remind himself that steel was never far.

They slipped into the cover of a ruined arch, shadows folding around them, as the scrape of boots echoed closer. Two Circle soldiers passed along the corridor, firebomb satchels strapped to their sides, long knives catching the faint glow of the braziers. Their voices carried, low at first, then sharp with the careless ease of men too used to violence. Arthur held his breath, his body taut against the stone, Pierre beside him still as a drawn bowstring. The soldiers’ talk snagged Arthur’s attention more than their blades ever could. “You see the Chronicle about that train job? Bastards put it all on us,” one muttered, his voice rough with coal dust. The other spat, the sound wet against the stone. “Aye, they left a piece of our uniform like we just lost it. Even took some of our crates to make it look true. Wasn’t us, but try telling the rest of the city that.” His tone was bitter, gnawed raw by weeks of accusation.

Arthur’s jaw flexed, breath steady but hot in his throat. He let the words coil in his mind, tracing the implications against the board of chalk lines he carried there. Evidence planted. Crates stolen. The attack pinned to the Circle though their hands were clean of it. He thought of the headlines, the whispers in alleys, the way the Gloam Sisters had pulled their skirts back from the Circle’s flames. Arthur didn’t let his mind dwell—he pressed the puzzle piece into place and left it for later. Beside him, Pierre’s brows drew together, but he wisely kept his silence, though Arthur could feel the questions rattling in his chest. He raised one hand, firm, reminding the boy: listen, don’t speak.

The soldiers turned a corner, but their voices lingered, muttering like embers carried on a draft. “Gloam Sisters want nothing to do with us now. Used to be allies, but not after that.” The bitterness in his tone curdled into something darker. “They think we’re weak. That we let someone make fools of us. But fire burns back.” Their footsteps faded, leaving only the crackle of torches and the drip of water in their wake. Silence stretched, broken only by Arthur’s slow exhale, a sound low enough that it vanished into the dark. He cast a glance toward Pierre, who had stiffened, his mouth half open as if to finally ask—but Arthur’s eyes cut sharp, warning him into silence again.

When the danger had passed, Arthur leaned in close, his whisper a thread of gravel through the smoke. “That’s how war starts. Lies sharper than blades. Someone wanted them cut off from the Sisters, and it worked. Now they’re bleeding for it.” His voice carried the weight of certainty, though it left Pierre looking pale in the gloom. The boy shifted his weight, the memory of their earlier talk still keeping him tethered, and nodded once, jaw tight with the effort of swallowing his words. Arthur watched him for a beat longer, then turned his gaze back down the hall where the Circle’s stronghold stretched, flames painting the walls with restless, hungry shadows.

The smell pressed heavier here—burnt copper, alchemical oil, smoke that clung like a second skin. Arthur’s mind ticked over what they had just heard, filing it among the fragments of intelligence that already pulled the Circle’s image apart. It explained the Sisters’ distance, explained the sudden desperation they saw in every zealot’s eyes. Yet it also meant the Circle was wounded, raw and dangerous in that woundedness, more likely to lash out like a beast cornered. His hand brushed against Pierre’s arm once more, a steadying signal, and he gave the nod to move. Step by step, deeper into the Veil, where truth waited like fire smothered under coal.

The corridor widened into a cavernous chamber where the air seemed to shimmer with heat, though no furnace burned nearby. Stacked high under the skeletal frame of rusted rafters were rows upon rows of crates, each one blackened at the edges as though kissed by fire. The mark blazed on them all—the burning globe of the Ember Circle, etched in red and copper paint, its edges still glistening as if scorched fresh. The sight was almost ceremonial, an altar of wood and iron branded with the zealotry of men who worshipped destruction as salvation. Arthur raised a hand, halting Pierre in his tracks as the boy’s sharp intake of breath betrayed his awe and fear. The glow of a distant brazier licked across Pierre’s wide eyes as he whispered, “Why would they even put their mark on everything? Doesn’t that just make it easier for people to know it’s them?” His voice was thin, a thread fraying in the heavy silence.

Arthur shifted the weight of his shoulders, binoculars still hanging loose around his neck as his eyes roved over the crates. His reply came low, steady, but edged with disdain that felt worn smooth by years of thinking the same thing. “Because they’re proud, Pierre. The Circle doesn’t see themselves as criminals. To them, this is all scripture and fire. They believe Doskvol is rotten to the core, and that only fire can cleanse it. Every crate, every sigil—it’s their declaration of faith. They want the city to know it’s them. They want people to fear it, to see fire and believe it means rebirth.” His jaw tightened as he murmured the next words, bitter as smoke. “The worthy, rising from the ashes like phoenixes. That’s the madness they live by. And it’s run by a

man just as mad—Emberlash. A zealot who thinks he's a prophet." Arthur's eyes flicked back to Pierre, hard and unyielding. "That's why their mark is everywhere. They think it's a promise."

Through the maze of crates, Arthur caught movement—shadows slipping in rhythm, practiced not panicked. Silas and Brand. The older man's crow perched high above, a sharp silhouette against the rafters, while Silas himself ghosted between stacks with his usual precision. Brand stayed close, his nerves taut but his blade ready, a sharp glint of steel catching the light before disappearing again. Arthur caught Silas's gaze through a narrow gap between the crates, and for a heartbeat the noise of the room seemed to fall away. They didn't need words. Their hands spoke the language of old hunts, old infiltrations, gestures carved into muscle memory: hold, flank, advance. Silas raised two fingers, then swept them left—Arthur mirrored the motion, signaling that he and Pierre would draw their attention while the other pair flanked. It was the kind of communication that didn't require trust so much as history.

Arthur slid low against the side of a crate, the rough wood scraping his coat as he motioned Pierre forward. The boy's grip tightened on the handle of a crawlies' case, mechanical spiders clinking faintly inside like a heartbeat of steel. He released one, the little machine scuttling across the floor until it reached the far side of the chamber. A click from Arthur's remote set it alight with sudden brilliance, a flare of sharp white that mimicked lantern-glass shattering. Three Circle zealots spun toward it, firebomb satchels swaying against their hips, knives raised as they cursed. One stepped too close, and Silas's shadow fell over him like a blade. A muffled grunt, the clash of steel, and the zealot went down hard, his knife skittering away across the floor as Silas wrenched his arm back until the man slumped unconscious against a crate.

The other two broke into action, one hurling a firebomb that smashed against the floorboards and erupted into liquid flame, heat roaring up in waves. Pierre yelped but Arthur shoved him low, dragging him across the ground until the fire guttered against a hastily thrown foam grenade. The hiss filled the air, smothering orange tongues beneath heavy white sludge that steamed against the heat. Arthur rose from the crouch in the same motion, revolver drawn, his shot cracking the chamber's silence wide open. The second zealot staggered back, the round grazing his shoulder, pain ripping a cry from his throat as his knife fell clattering. He lunged still, wild with fury, but Brand intercepted him, blade turning the strike aside before slamming the hilt into the man's jaw, dropping him unconscious with a dull thud.

The last zealot screamed fragments of scripture—"Fire cleanses, ash redeems!"—as he rushed, torch raised high. Arthur moved to block but Silas was faster, a low sweep knocking the man's legs from under him. The torch rolled harmlessly into the foam-slick, sizzling to a dead ember. The zealot struggled up, but a sharp crack from Silas's fist to his temple sent him limp against the floor. The crow above let out a harsh cry as if punctuating the end. For a moment, only the crackle of smothered flames and the faint hiss of cooling foam filled the chamber. Arthur stood breathing steady, revolver still aimed, until the silence settled like a verdict.

Pierre leaned against a crate, his chest rising sharp with breath but his hands steadier now, some of the panic burned out of him by survival. Brand wiped his blade clean on his sleeve, glancing at Silas for silent approval, while the older man only gave a curt nod, his crow hopping once along the rafters as if echoing the gesture. Arthur holstered his revolver, eyes sweeping the chamber, already measuring the next step. Minimal damage, three zealots down, and the Veil still ahead of them thick with secrets. "That's one skirmish," he muttered under his breath, more to himself than to the others. "The real fire's deeper in."

Pierre's voice cut through the stillness, shaky but edged with hope. "Was that… all of them?" His eyes darted across the chamber, toward the corners lost in shadow, the stacked crates looming like tombstones. No one answered him at first. The silence thickened, a weight pressing down on them as each man instinctively turned toward Silas. The crow stirred above, its wings

brushing the rafters with a faint rush of air as it leapt into motion, gliding through the narrow spaces with an uncanny ease. The others waited, breaths held, the sound of the bird's flight the only movement in the smothered hush. Silas stood motionless, head tilted as though listening to something beyond their reach. When his eyes finally opened again, he spoke in a low certainty, the words more like a verdict than a reassurance. "The place is now empty. It was only these three inside here." The crow returned a moment later, landing above him with a faint scrape of claws, sealing the statement with its presence.

Brand muttered under his breath, his tone sharp with unease, "Too easy." His hand flexed around the hilt of his blade as though waiting for a sudden strike, eyes narrowing toward the edges of the chamber as if expecting more zealots to crawl out of the shadows. Arthur ignored the comment outwardly, but he marked it all the same. Brand wasn't wrong—ease in Doskvol was almost always a trap. Pierre, restless from the silence, drifted toward one of the nearest crates, tracing his fingers over the scorched emblem of the burning globe stamped into the side. His lips moved soundlessly as he read the stenciled words, his eyes flicking toward Arthur as though asking for permission. When none came, he set his jaw and pried it open with the edge of his crowbar.

The lid came free with a groan, and heat rushed up as though the air itself had been trapped inside with the contents. The crate was packed with barrels marked in chalk, each one sweating faint fumes of burning oil. Pierre reeled slightly at the scent, nostrils stinging, before moving on to the next. His crowbar clanged against the wood, snapping the lid loose to reveal a neat stack of glass spheres, alchemical accelerants gleaming with a sickly glow, the faint shimmer of volatile light pulsing within. "Emperor's bones," Pierre whispered, his voice thin, awe and fear mingled. Arthur stepped closer, his shadow falling over the crates as he inspected them. The Circle had stocked enough fire here to incinerate half a district if they chose.

Arthur crouched, his expression hardening into that mask of control he wore in the field. "Check them all. But careful." His voice carried no room for argument. "What we're after isn't fuel, and it isn't firebombs. We're looking for something different." He pulled a folded scrap of paper from the inner pocket of his coat, laying it across the lid of a crate so they could see by the weak light. The sketch was rough but precise—the egg-shaped shell, etched with vent lines and sigil markings, the first form of what he'd come to call the Ladher Release Mechanism. His thumb pressed against the paper as if pinning the image into reality. "This is it. This is what they've been building. If you see anything that even resembles this, you come to me. Immediately."

Pierre leaned closer, his eyes darting between the drawing and the crates as if he could conjure the weapon into being. Brand swallowed hard, muttering, "Looks like a coffin turned inside out." His attempt at humor fell flat, even to himself. Arthur's gaze snapped to the two boys, sharp and unwavering. "You don't wander. You don't play hero. You stay within reach of me or Silas at all times. If you find something, you call it out. Do you understand?" His tone was colder than the steel of his revolver, the words designed to cut through nerves before they festered into mistakes. Both Pierre and Brand nodded quickly, their eyes lowered like schoolboys caught too close to fire.

They spread out through the chamber, the scrape of boots on wood and the faint hiss of opened crates filling the silence. Pierre's hands trembled as he worked, though his movements grew steadier with each lid he pried loose, the discipline settling over him like armor. Brand moved more cautiously, his eyes darting often toward the shadows, his unease less about the crates than the possibility of unseen enemies. Arthur hovered between them, his own attention sweeping each corner, every shifting shadow, while Silas remained the sentinel—his crow tracing slow arcs above, the man himself standing in the gloom with the patience of stone.

Arthur let his gaze rest briefly on Silas, noting the stillness in his posture, the way his hand hovered always near the hilt at his side. He trusted the man's instincts, trusted them more than his own in moments like this. Silas's bird dipped low, its feathers scattering dust from the rafters as it circled once before returning to its perch. The message was silent but clear: still safe, for now. Arthur turned back to the crates, to the scent of oil and scorched metal filling his lungs, to the boys fumbling through lessons of survival in real time. He felt the weight of it pressing on him—the responsibility, the stakes, the ghost of Adrian's face behind his eyes.

The chamber was quiet save for their movements, but the silence felt alive, pressing in from every corner. Arthur tapped the sketch once, folding it back into his coat as though concealing a secret too dangerous to remain exposed. He could feel the question burning at the back of his throat, the one Pierre hadn't dared to ask: what if the weapon wasn't here at all? He smothered it before it could take shape, burying it beneath the same iron stillness he wore like armor. For now, all that mattered was the search, and keeping the boys close enough to survive it.

The warehouse seemed to stretch deeper the further they went, the shadows stretching into veins of blackness where lamplight did not reach. Arthur moved with measured precision, every step deliberate, the weight of silence pressing against his ears. He had just left Silas and the others combing through crates when he came upon a narrow door tucked between stacks of timber beams, its iron latch rust-stained but worn smooth from frequent use. He crouched slightly, ear angled toward the seam, breath shallow as he listened. The air leaking from the cracks was warm, tinged faintly with ink and candle wax, a stark contrast to the acrid stench of oil and fire outside. He was about to lean closer when a sudden pressure touched the middle of his back. Arthur's hand flew toward the revolver at his belt before he turned, jaw set, only to find Pierre frozen behind him, eyes wide with apology.

"Sorry," the younger man whispered quickly, voice cracking as the words spilled out. "I was just—just trying to get your attention." Arthur's stare bore into him, cold and sharp enough to pin him to the spot, until Pierre lowered his gaze like a chastised child. His hand hovered uncertainly at his side before he continued in a smaller voice, "In that direction, further left. Crates are missing. Judging by the space and the drag marks on the floor—twelve, maybe more. They've already been taken somewhere." He gestured vaguely, the movement quick and anxious, as if the very act of noticing made him responsible for the absence. Arthur gave a single, short nod, the acknowledgment clipped and silent, but enough.

He raised one finger sharply, signaling Pierre to keep still and quiet, then turned back to the door. The handle was cool under his glove despite the warmth seeping from the cracks, and Arthur eased it down with the patience of someone who knew that noise could mean death. He leaned just enough to peer through the small square of grimy glass set in the upper panel. The room beyond was dim, lit only by a stub of candle that guttered weakly on a heavy wooden table. There was no movement. No breath. No sound but the faint hiss of wax dripping down to the scarred surface. Arthur's eyes sharpened on the scattered notes, papers fanned carelessly across the boards, ink stains still wet enough to gleam faintly in the flicker. Whoever had used this space hadn't cared to hide their trail.

He slipped inside, shoulders hunched low, his shadow stretching long and crooked across the floorboards as Pierre followed reluctantly. The air here was different—stale but alive with the scent of work left half-finished. A ledger lay open with neat columns of numbers, beside it scraps of paper with jagged writing scrawled in haste. A mug of tea sat forgotten, the rim stained, a film hardened across the surface. The room had the feel of importance but not secrecy, the kind of place men returned to without fear of interruption. That arrogance unsettled Arthur more than the empty silence.

The walls bore faint outlines where maps had been pinned and removed, corners marked by tack holes, the residue of wax that had dripped from sealing sticks. Arthur's eyes swept across everything with the detached calculation of a man who could not afford to miss a single detail. Pierre hovered behind him, shifting his weight from foot to foot, his eyes catching on every scrap like a magpie, but Arthur kept his focus. This wasn't just storage—it was command. The Circle had been directing operations here, leaving evidence in plain sight because they believed no one could reach them in their stronghold.

Arthur's jaw tightened as he brushed his gloved hand across one sheet, smudging the ink faintly. The arrogance of it burned against him—this wasn't carelessness, this was dominance. The Circle moved like zealots who believed fire would protect them, their symbols stamped on crates, their words scrawled openly on paper, their meeting rooms left alive with signs of strategy. They did not hide because they thought themselves untouchable. Arthur felt the weight of that thought settle into him like a stone, heavier than the gun at his side.

Pierre shifted closer, lowering his voice to a whisper that almost vanished under the candle's hiss. "They weren't hiding this, were they?" he asked, almost as if he needed Arthur to confirm what he already saw. Arthur didn't answer at first, his gaze locked on the papers, the messy constellation of notes scattered across the table. Finally, he said, voice low, each word measured: "No. They weren't." His tone carried the weight of something darker than discovery—it was the realization that their enemy had no fear.

For a moment, the only sound was the faint crackle of wax and the slow, synchronized rhythm of their breaths. Arthur stood motionless, the sketch of the Ladher weapon burning in his mind, the missing crates Pierre had noticed, the open arrogance of the Circle etched into the walls of this place. He knew the truth before they would even finish searching: this was no cache, no hoard to strip. This was a place of planning. And somewhere beyond these walls, twelve crates had already been moved, carried into the night toward fire and blood.

Arthur moved slow through the room, eyes scanning, fingers brushing across the edges of paper and leather as if every detail might hide something worth carrying back. The drawers creaked under his touch, half-filled with scraps of parchment, notes scribbled in margins, ledgers bloated with numbers that stretched down in neat but faceless columns. He flipped one open, his eyes tracking the ink: large sums, exchanged regularly, amounts that could buy a factory floor or an army's worth of blades. But the names were smoke, nothing but initials or vague markers, aliases that proved nothing in the end. His jaw tightened as he set the book down, the frustration of seeing movement without a face gnawing at him. Behind him, Pierre rustled through a stack of loose sheets, his gloved hands too quick, too eager.

"What's a Umbral item?" Pierre asked suddenly, the words breaking the thick silence. His tone wasn't mocking or light—it was curious, almost reverent, like he'd stumbled into something that gnawed at the edge of his understanding. Arthur turned, brow furrowed, moving closer to see what he had uncovered. Spread across the boy's hands were notes unlike the ledgers—these were filled with jagged writing, obsessive in its energy. Lists of names, artefacts, half-sketched sigils, and strange accounts copied from older sources. Arthur leaned closer, scanning over them, his voice a low murmur when he answered. "As far as I've heard—powerful magical relics. Ancient, older than Doskvol, older than the Empire. But stories like this tend to grow teeth in the retelling. I've never believed they could be what the whispers make them out to be."

Pierre tilted his head, eyes narrowing as he traced a line of text with his finger, reading under his breath. "Seven items in total… each with a unique power. Source of great magical potential." His voice was thin, almost caught between disbelief and fascination. "Says here most of them have been scattered, lost… some even buried outside the city. Here—Deadland Woods." He glanced up, uncertain. "Maybe that's why people call those lands cursed?" Arthur's gaze lingered on the

boy for a moment before shifting back to the pages, his frown deepening. The words seemed less like fables and more like instructions, the kind of notes men made when they were searching for something, convinced it could be found.

Arthur's eyes caught on a page slightly apart from the others, half-crumpled but set aside like it had been read more often. He tugged it free, smoothing it across the table. The handwriting here was different, not the tidy ink of a clerk but something rushed, personal, uneven. Across the sheet, scrawled in thick black strokes, were lines about the Umbral Key. His breath slowed as he read, piecing the fragments together. "Rumored to be the master key to all locks… forged from something beyond steel, beyond mortal hands." The words sank heavy into the dim room. A thief's dream, a weapon of subtle power, not brute force. His thumb brushed the margin where the ink had blotted, and he read on: "Last known to be in possession of Aldric Stoneborn. Lost to the years."

Pierre leaned in, eyes widening slightly as though the name itself carried a weight he hadn't expected. "Stoneborn," he muttered. "So it's true? That family—those kids—they really had something like this?" His voice wavered between awe and fear, as if the thought of children holding such a relic unsettled him. Arthur didn't look up from the page, his jaw setting harder. "If they ever had it at all," he said evenly. "Rumors have a way of growing roots in this city. Aldric Stoneborn's been dead a long time. Whatever he carried went with him into the dark, unless someone was quick enough to pry it loose."

The candle sputtered on the table, its wax running in slow rivers down the brass holder, the room alive with the smell of old smoke and ink. Arthur folded the page carefully, sliding it into his coat as Pierre continued to thumb through the rest. The boy's hands shook faintly, excitement tangled with nerves, but Arthur's face remained unreadable. His thoughts pressed heavier, the connection drawing itself whether he wanted it or not—the Circle's obsession, their sudden moves toward desperation, their eyes set on the Stoneborn children who barely had enough to eat. Was this why? Not vengeance, not strategy, but a relic whispered to unlock every door, every vault?

Arthur set his hand on the table, palm flat against the rough wood, the sound sharp in the stillness. His mind turned back to the missing crates, the arrogance of the room, the zealots who marched with fire in their lungs. He could almost hear their chants vibrating through the walls, the promise of purification they believed themselves chosen to deliver. The Umbral Key was just another myth to feed their fire, another spark to drive them into blood and ruin. But whether myth or truth, Arthur knew one thing: the Circle believed in it. And that belief was enough to burn Doskvol from the inside out.

Pierre swallowed hard, setting the rest of the notes back in a trembling stack. He looked to Arthur for some reassurance, but Arthur gave none. His eyes stayed fixed on the folded page in his pocket, his mind racing past the candlelight into the dark streets outside. If the Circle was chasing shadows, then they would leave bodies in their wake until they caught one.

Arthur's voice was calm but low, that kind of steadiness that came only when he was forcing it through clenched teeth. He set a hand briefly on Pierre's shoulder and said, "These are just stories, Pierre. Tales people spin to make sense of the dark. Until I see proof, they're no different than ghost stories told to scare children." His tone carried weight, but his eyes gave him away—always measuring, always filing details into that relentless board in his head. Pierre nodded but the stiffness in his jaw betrayed him, his young face drawn tight, eyes darting back to the notes like he was trying to catch something slipping out of reach. Arthur didn't press him. Belief was a dangerous thing in Doskvol, and Pierre was still too new to know how heavy it could grow.

Arthur turned back into the room, letting his hands move across the shelves, the drawers, the mess of papers and discarded pens. Somewhere in here there had to be a trace of the LRM, the weapon he had started to call by its shape and purpose—the Ladher Release Mechanism. It gnawed at him, the thought of it sitting hidden while they wasted time on scraps. His fingers brushed against another ledger, but it was the same as before—coin passing hands without faces, smoke instead of proof. He felt the frustration claw at the back of his skull but forced it down, keeping his breathing steady in the hush of the office.

Behind him Pierre's muttering filled the silence, faint but insistent, "Stoneborn… Stoneborn…" The repetition had the edge of someone digging at a locked memory, trying to pry it open. Arthur half-turned, watching him trace something against the wall with his fingertips. A map. Large, pinned to the boards, nearly covering them in hand-drawn lines and circles. The boy leaned closer, eyes narrowed, as if the shapes were starting to take on meaning that hadn't been obvious before. Arthur straightened from the ledger, his instincts prickling, and stepped across the room toward him.

"Erm… Arthur," Pierre said, his voice carrying a nervous weight this time. His hand tapped the edge of the map, fingers hovering like he didn't want to touch too much. "Look at this." Arthur came beside him, the dim light catching the jagged shadows of the ink strokes. At first glance it looked like the usual madness of zealots—lines everywhere, circles piled on circles. But now that Arthur really looked, he saw it too. Routes. Targets. Plans. Coalbridge factories marked with sharp crosses, Hexspire riddled with multiple black rings, the Old Port drawn underlined, jagged and sure.

Arthur's eyes tracked lower, to where the ink grew heavier, more violent. A circle carved in furious red strokes, pressed so hard the parchment had nearly torn. The Iron Den orphanage. Arthur's jaw tightened as he recognized the mark for what it was: priority. His pulse thudded once in his throat, that familiar cold weight settling in his gut. Pierre's voice came quiet but shaken, "Arthur… correct me if I'm wrong, but would Ulric Stoneborn be the son of the late Aldric Stoneborn?" His eyes didn't leave the red ink, like the circle itself might burn through him if he blinked.

Arthur's breath left him slow, but his eyes stayed locked on that circled ruin. Memories surfaced—half-whispers from the streets, rumors of Ulric, the boy leading other orphans with scraps of steel and scraps of hope, hiding in the husk of the orphanage that had once belonged to his father. Aldric Stoneborn's shadow stretched further than anyone thought, it seemed, and if the Circle believed a Umbral item was tied to that bloodline, then Ulric's shelter had just been turned into a bull's-eye. Arthur set his jaw, the words heavy as iron as they left him. "Those kids are in trouble."

Arthur's eyes lingered on the red circle carved into the map until it felt branded into the back of his mind. Pierre shifted uneasily beside him, voice low but tight with urgency. "They're going after the orphans. It has to be because of that Umbral item. Think about it—why else? A bunch of street kids don't mean anything to them unless it's power they're chasing." Arthur drew in a slow breath through his nose, forcing himself to steady the heat crawling up his ribs. His gaze flicked to the papers scattered across the desk, then back to the map. Pierre's words weren't wrong. The Circle had always worshipped at the altar of fire, but this? This wasn't zealotry alone. This was hunger.

"They're desperate," Arthur muttered, half to himself. His tone was measured but sharp at the edges, the words pulled like teeth from somewhere heavy in his chest. "Desperate enough to play a move this reckless. Attacking children…" His jaw tightened, breath hitching for a fraction before he forced it flat again. "They wouldn't do it unless they believed they needed what's inside that place." He could hear his own mind grinding, the logic slicing against instinct.

Something had driven them to this cliff. And when men like Emberlash reached that edge, they didn't jump alone—they dragged the city with them.

Arthur's thoughts twisted inward, quiet and cold. The Circle had bled allies these past weeks. First the Gloam Sisters, then their standing with the street factions eroded. Their war with the Cyphers was already a long burn. Someone was turning the screws in the shadows, making zealots bleed desperation out through their schemes. It was too precise, too sharp a spiral to be only chance. Arthur's stomach knotted with the thought. He didn't need to put a name to the suspicion clawing at him—he could feel it. A shadow pulling strings where no hand should be.

The air was thick with the dust of the old office, silence pressing on them in the dim glow of the lamp. Then it shattered. A loud caw cracked through the night, harsh and commanding, echoing against the walls from outside the door. Arthur's head snapped up, breath catching in his chest. Silas's bird. That sound wasn't just a noise—it was a signal, sharpened from years in the field. Company. Arthur's hand went instantly to Pierre's shoulder, pressing him down low. "Hide," he mouthed, voice no louder than the scrape of cloth. They ducked into the shadowed gap behind a heavy cabinet, Arthur's heart thudding steady but strong as he watched the doorway.

The hinges groaned a moment later and boots scraped on the floorboards. Three Circle soldiers stumbled into the room, the acrid stink of ash and oil clinging to their coats. They carried themselves like men who owned the space, loud with their voices, laughter spilling into the silence. One tossed his satchel on the desk without even glancing at the notes scattered there, his hand idly tapping the hilt of the long knife at his belt. None of them saw Arthur and Pierre crouched in the dark, the shadows keeping them tucked out of sight.

Their talk filled the room, careless and booming, like zealots drunk on their own fire. "Operation Emberwing," one said, the word rolling with pride across his tongue. "Tonight it all begins." Another barked a laugh, unstrapping his gloves as he leaned against the table. "Aye, the whole city won't know where to look. Espiritas chasing shadows in Coalbridge, Imperials spread thin at the Old Port, Hexspire boiling over. All of them running in circles while we take what matters."

Arthur kept still, every muscle locked in silence as the words struck his ears. A massive, simultaneous strike. Not just chaos, but engineered distraction. He could feel Pierre's breath uneven beside him, but the boy stayed quiet, eyes wide, pupils burning in the dim light. Arthur's jaw ground slowly as he listened. The Circle wasn't just lashing out—they had built a net to strangle the city's response. His hands flexed on his knees, iron discipline keeping him from moving. One wrong breath, and the fire would find them before they were ready.

The soldiers talked freely at first, their words thick with arrogance, sharp as sparks flung off iron. One leaned against the desk, fingers tracing the red circle on the map as though savoring it. "The Iron Den falls tonight," he said with grim satisfaction. "That's where the true fire begins." Another snorted, pulling a flask from his coat. "And the rest of the city? Let the Espiritas choke on smoke while the Imperials stumble blind. By dawn, the Circle will be all anyone fears." Their laughter cracked through the room, ugly and certain, until one voice broke off mid-chuckle.

Arthur's gaze locked on him instantly. The man's expression shifted, his body stiffening as his eyes scanned the table. His gloved hand hovered over the papers, rifling through them with sudden precision. He stilled, then spoke in a low growl that froze his companions. "Something's wrong. These papers—" his gaze swept the room, narrowing— "they weren't like this. Someone's touched them." The room snapped into silence, all three now on alert. Knives loosened in scabbards, boots shifting, breaths measured. Arthur pressed a steady hand against Pierre's arm, signaling him to hold still. But then—

The muffled crash of a struggle ripped through the air outside the door. The dull thud of fists, a body against wood, then the unmistakable crack of a shot fired. Shouts followed, the harsh

voice of Silas cut short by another scuffle. Arthur's stomach clenched; Brand and Silas had been found. The three soldiers whipped their heads toward the sound, knives half-drawn, steps already moving. Arthur knew they had seconds before they left this room to reinforce the fight. There was no time for patience. He met Pierre's wide eyes and gave a single sharp nod. Attack now, or be surrounded.

Arthur moved first, his hand snapping one of Lannic's crawlies from his belt and pitching it hard across the floor. It skittered forward with a whir of tiny legs before detonating into a burst of piercing light and metallic shriek, the sudden flare searing the dark and rattling the glass panes. The soldiers staggered, cursing, eyes burning from the brilliance. Arthur surged from cover, shoulder slamming the closest zealot into the desk, scattering papers like burning feathers. The man fought back with wild strength, knife flashing. Arthur caught the blade against his vambrace, sparks snapping, before driving a fist into the zealot's jaw.

Pierre fumbled but recovered quickly, yanking a foam grenade from his belt and rolling it across the floor toward the two others. The small device hissed, then burst into a wave of expanding chemical foam that clung to everything it touched. One zealot's legs were swallowed instantly, hardening into a vise that locked him in place. He roared, hacking at it with his knife, but the blade stuck fast. The other dodged, vaulting over a chair, his knife slicing past Pierre's coat. Pierre yelped, stumbling back, grabbing for one of the arc flares on his belt. With a twist, he hurled it. The flare cracked into the zealot's shoulder and released a concussive shock that flung him against the wall, shattering plaster and leaving him gasping.

Arthur grappled hard with the zealot beneath him, the man's breath hot with smoke and madness. The soldier spat Circle scripture through bloodied teeth, even as Arthur slammed him down again, wrestling for the knife. He was strong, too strong, his zeal a furnace that made every strike harder to contain. Arthur shifted tactics, jamming another crawlie into the man's belt before wrenching himself away. The small device erupted with a deafening screech and sparks, a distraction long enough for Arthur to bring his elbow crashing down into the man's temple, sending him sprawling senseless onto the floor.

The foam-snarled soldier bellowed behind them, straining until his face flushed purple, but the hardened mass held him fast, locking his boots in place like stone. Pierre, chest heaving, turned toward him with the grappling line he had nearly botched earlier. He whipped it forward, the weighted hook catching around the zealot's arms, jerking him off balance. Arthur strode across the floor, ripped the knife from the man's hand, and pressed him face-first into the desk. The fight burned hot and quick, brutal in its close quarters, but as the last soldier's struggles gave way to groans, the room fell silent again save for their ragged breaths.

Arthur's fists unclenched slowly, the pounding of his pulse still loud in his ears. The three Circle men were down, subdued but alive, their fire choked by foam and steel. Papers littered the floor, the map pinned against the wall glaring back at him with its red circles. From outside, another shot cracked the night, followed by Silas's crow crying sharp and urgent. Arthur locked eyes with Pierre, who was pale but steadier now, and the meaning needed no words: the night was far from over.

The moment Arthur and Pierre pushed through the corridor and into the cavernous expanse of stacked crates, the scene hit him like a hammer. Silas and Brand were pinned near the far wall, half-hidden behind an overturned cart, ducking shots that shattered planks and sent sparks ricocheting across the floor. Five Circle soldiers closed in on them with the same fanatic fire in their eyes Arthur had seen too many times before—knives flashing in one hand, pistols spitting lead in the other, their mouths spilling fragments of scripture like battle chants. The air was thick with smoke from blackpowder, with the sharp sting of alchemicals leaking from pierced barrels. One wrong spark, one stray shot, and the whole room would go up like a funeral pyre.

Arthur didn't hesitate. He shoved Pierre toward cover and yanked a crawlies' case from his belt, thumbing one awake before flinging it across the floor. The small brass spider skittered beneath the legs of a zealot charging Silas, its legs ticking in a mad scramble before erupting in a blinding spray of sparks and a shrill metallic scream. The soldier stumbled, clawing at his eyes, and Silas used the moment to hurl a weighted chain that wrapped tight around the man's arm, yanking him into a violent spin that cracked him against the side of a crate. But the others roared in answer, one loosing a volley of shots that punched holes through the wood just inches from Brand's head. Brand's panicked shout rang across the chaos: "You mad bastards! This whole place will blow!" The Circle zealots only laughed, firing again.

Pierre, wide-eyed but determined, scrambled to Arthur's side, pulling free the arc-flare he'd used earlier. "I can take the flank!" he shouted, his voice cracking but steady enough to hear. Arthur gave a curt nod and broke into a sprint, vaulting over a crate as bullets whined past his ears. One grazed his coat, setting fabric smoldering before he slapped it down. He came down hard on the nearest zealot, shoulder-first, driving the man into the floor. The pistol went off wild, the shot sparking against stone, and Arthur slammed the soldier's wrist until the weapon clattered loose. He used the man's own momentum to throw him into the path of another, buying Pierre the space he needed. The boy hurled his flare—its shockwave caught two zealots mid-charge, hurling them back against the stacks so hard the crates rattled. For an instant, the room seemed to tilt under the impact.

Silas rose from behind cover, his face a mask of grim focus. With a snap of his wrist, his crow took to the air, wings cutting the smoke in a blur of black. The bird dove, striking one soldier's face with a flurry of talons, forcing him to fire blind, his bullet tearing into the leg of his own comrade. Brand seized the opening, charging with surprising fury for a man his size, swinging a length of pipe like a cudgel. He smashed the pistol from the wounded zealot's hand and drove him to the ground, pinning him with a knee before wrenching his arm back until bones cracked. Another came at Brand with a knife, but Silas's chain lashed out, catching the blade mid-swing and jerking it away before it could land.

But still they pressed—the zealots fought like men already dead, each swing and shot carrying no hesitation, no fear. Arthur ducked a wild slash, feeling the blade's breath across his cheek, then rammed his elbow into the zealot's ribs, following with a headbutt that left both of them reeling. The man snarled scripture through bloodied teeth, reaching for another weapon, but Arthur struck again, harder, until he crumpled. Another soldier fired wildly toward Pierre, bullets chewing through a crate of accelerants. The stench of oil filled the room, spilling in a slick river across the floor. Arthur's heart lurched—if flame touched it, they'd all be vapor in seconds. "Keep them down!" he barked, his voice raw with urgency.

Pierre, face white but jaw clenched, grabbed one of Lannic's smoke-bombs and cracked it against the ground. The thick, acrid cloud rolled out in seconds, swallowing the crates, choking the zealots in their own chaos. Gunfire turned to hacking coughs as the Cyphers moved in the cover, shadows amidst the smoke. Arthur drove his knee into a chest, hearing the wind burst from the zealot, while Silas struck low, his chain wrapping ankles before jerking a man flat into the oil-slicked floor. Brand, still clutching his makeshift pipe, brought it down with merciless force, knocking another soldier out cold. Pierre, half-blind from the smoke, stumbled but managed to jam one of his crawlies directly onto a zealot's back; the device shrieked and sparked, sending the man convulsing before Arthur's fist laid him out.

When the smoke cleared, the last zealot was on his knees, blood streaming from his nose, Silas's chain drawn tight across his throat while Arthur held his knife to the man's temple. The room stank of sweat, powder, and burning oil, but the crates were intact, the fire had not claimed them, and the Cyphers still stood. Arthur panted hard, shoulders slick with sweat beneath his coat, his eyes scanning each of his men. Brand's lip was split, Pierre's hands shook like leaves

in a storm, Silas's crow circled above with a triumphant cry. But they had won. Against fire, steel, and madness, they had clawed victory from the jaws of chaos, and the Circle's zealots lay broken at their feet.

Arthur wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand, the knife still loose in his grip, the weight of the fight humming in his bones. The room was quiet now save for the groans of the three unconscious zealots sprawled across the floor and the faint crackle of oil dripping from ruptured barrels. Silas's crow circled once above, then dropped to its perch on his shoulder, feathers ruffling as if unsettled by the air itself. Silas's voice cut low, urgent. "We've pressed our luck far enough tonight. This place is getting too hot. We've taken what we can—time to vanish before reinforcements spill in." His tone carried no hesitation, only the clipped rhythm of someone used to making choices with seconds to spare. He glanced at Arthur, eyes hard but steady, and Arthur knew he was right: staying longer was suicide.

Brand kicked the nearest zealot's pistol across the floor, his face twisted in disgust. He barked out, "Too hot? I'd say it's not half as hot as it should be. Where are the rest of these lunatics? Three in here, five outside, that's a handful of flies, not a swarm. For a stockpile like this?" He shook his head, scanning the crates as though expecting them to burst open. "This doesn't smell right. Place should be crawling with fire-eaters, not… this." His words echoed the unease Arthur had already been carrying. He crouched, brushing a hand across the maps he'd tucked into his coat earlier, the red ink still burned into his mind. "They're not here because they're already moving," Arthur said, his voice flat, heavy with certainty. "This wasn't meant to be defended. It's staging. A launch point."

Pierre, breath ragged but eyes alight with adrenaline, spun toward Arthur, clutching one of the scattered notes. "The map, the plans—they're not just rumors, are they? All those marks, those factories and districts. And the red circle on the orphanage." His voice cracked on the last word, but he pressed on, urgent. "They're going after the Iron Den, Arthur. Ulric and the other kids. That's why this place is thin. They've already emptied crates, already moved troops." Arthur gave a sharp nod, his jaw tightening as he spoke. "Primary target's the orphans. The Circle wants the Stoneborn out of the way—or something they think Ulric has." He didn't say it aloud, but the Umbral whispers echoed in his mind. Desperation made zealots bold, and someone in the shadows was pushing them into madness.

Silas's face hardened at the words, the lines cut deep in his expression. "Children," he said, the word bitter like ash in his mouth. "They're aiming fire at children. Those bastards have fallen further than I thought." His grip on the chain in his hand was white-knuckled, every muscle in his jaw flexing. For a man who measured every word, the fury in his tone was unrestrained. "I won't stand by while they burn kids alive. I won't." Arthur looked at him, their eyes locking, and found the same cold horror mirrored there. They had fought fanatics, mercenaries, killers, but turning the flame on an orphanage was another depth of cruelty entirely. "Then we don't waste time," Arthur said. "We leave now. We've seen enough."

Pierre was already halfway to the door, fire in his eyes, his hand jittering from too much energy to contain. "Then let's go already! Every second we stand here talking is another second they've got to reach those kids. We can make it—we have to." He looked at Arthur, pleading, as though sheer urgency could pull them forward. "We can't let them face that alone. Not kids." Arthur held his gaze, steady, then spoke firmly. "We're going. But we go together. And we don't run in blind. We'll need every bit of steel and sense if we're to reach them in time."

Brand snorted, still gripping his dented pipe like a lifeline. His eyes darted to the leaking oil creeping closer to an overturned lantern, and his voice carried a raw edge. "Fine by me. Just get me the hell out of this powder keg before someone sneezes and sends us all flying to the moon." He yanked his coat tighter and moved toward the shadows near the exit, muttering

curses under his breath. For all his grumbling, Arthur knew Brand wasn't running—just venting the fear all of them carried.

Arthur gathered them with a sharp gesture, his words final. "We move quiet. We move fast. And if we're lucky, we make it before the Circle lights their fire." His gaze swept each man in turn, finding their faces pale but determined. Silas's eyes were fire under ice, Pierre's bright with stubborn courage, Brand's tight with grim resolve. Together, they slipped into the night, the weight of what they'd uncovered pressing down on them heavier than any crate in that warehouse. And in Arthur's chest, beneath the iron calm, a cold fury burned: if the Circle thought they could drown Doskvol's children in flame, then they had made themselves his quarry. The four of them slipped out into the alleys of Coalbridge, the stink of ash and oil clinging to their coats, the taste of smoke caught sharp in the back of their throats. The factory stacks loomed above like dark watchtowers, their red throats glowing as they belched fire into the night, each plume painting the sky in sickly orange. The streets below crawled with shadows—half-seen workers moving like phantoms through the haze, their faces blackened with soot until they looked like specters born from the furnaces themselves. Cobblestones slick with grease gleamed under the lanterns, and every corner whispered of violence yet to come. In the distance, the toll of a shift bell rang out, hollow and metallic, echoing through the district like a dirge.

They moved quick, their boots striking rhythm against the stone, the weight of what they had discovered pressing down heavier than the choking smoke. Behind them, the Veil of Shadows sank back into silence, its hidden fires sealed away once more, but Arthur knew it was only the quiet before something worse. The Circle's plan had been laid bare, their desperation scrawled across the maps and crates, and the thought of children marked in red ink twisted in his chest like a knife. He glanced at Silas, whose crow cut black arcs above the skyline, its caw sharp against the roar of the chimneys. Brand kept throwing wary looks over his shoulder, muttering about sparks and gunpowder, while Pierre's eyes burned with a feverish mix of dread and defiance, the adrenaline still coursing through him.

Coalbridge stretched wide around them, a maze of industry and smoke, every factory window glowing faint like watchful eyes, every rail line humming with the restless pulse of a city being devoured by its own engines. To Arthur, it was as though Doskvol itself was leaning in, listening, waiting—its breath hot on the back of his neck, its hunger endless. Somewhere in the sprawl, the Iron Den orphanage stood circled in red, its walls about to be tested by fire. And as the four cyphers melted into the night, the chimneys continued to burn above them, spitting flame into the dark as if the city itself was already preparing for war.

Chapter 04: **The Orphan's War**

The smoke from Coalbridge still clung to their coats as the four of them pressed southward, boots pounding the cracked stone of the bridge that spanned the black waters below. The river stank of tar and refuse, a stagnant mirror for the last glow of the sun that was dying behind Doskvol's skyline. On either bank, the city burned—factories spitting flame and smoke into the air, rooftops flickering orange as the Circle's strikes tore through districts with a mad devotion. Arthur felt the weight of every step, the ache in his shoulders from the binoculars still strung at his side, and the heavier ache in his chest from the truth they had uncovered. He glanced at the men beside him—Silas quiet, eyes forward like a blade pointed at its target, Brand muttering curses under his breath, and Pierre, his face pale but his stride determined, keeping pace despite the nervous twitch of his fingers brushing over the holster at his hip. The fires on the horizon made the whole city look like a forge, hammering itself into something cruel and unrecognizable.

"We saw it clear, plain as ink on the page," Arthur said, his voice low but carrying, meant to cut through the wind rushing across the bridge. "Coalbridge, Hexspire, the Old Port—they've planned strikes across the city. And worse, they've circled one place heavier than the rest." He let the words hang a moment before finishing, his jaw tightening. "The Iron Den orphanage. That's where they're headed in force." He didn't need to explain why the Circle would target children; the notes they found had spelled it in red ink and desperation. His hands curled into fists as he walked, the leather of his gloves creaking in the gathering dark. He wished it was a lie, wished the world was not so cruelly predictable when it came to what power-hungry fanatics would do for scraps of control.

Brand gave a sharp laugh that wasn't laughter at all. "So let me ask this straight," he said, voice harsh with the sting of smoke in his throat. "We've got fires tearing up half the city already—Coalbridge is going to be rubble by dawn—and we're not putting them out? We're not warning anyone? We're running headlong to an orphanage when we could be stopping real destruction?" He threw the words like knives, his pace quickening as though the anger itself carried him forward. His eyes caught the glow of the city flames, making him look half-lit by the same fire that was swallowing Doskvol alive. "Why not stop the bleeding where it's worst?" he pressed, his tone jagged. "Why kids, when there's half a dozen districts burning?"

"Because they're kids," Pierre shot back, his voice cracking but steadying as he raised it over the clash of the wind. His hand gestured out, trembling in the orange light of the burning skyline. "Coalbridge has soldiers, workers, people who can fight back or flee. Same with Hexspire, same with the Port. But the Iron Den? Those are orphans. Little ones. They can't fight off men with firebombs and knives. If the Circle wants them, then they're nothing but lambs in a slaughterhouse unless we get there first." His breath shuddered, and he bit down on the fear trembling on his lips. "We saw the red circle around it, Arthur. They want the orphans more than anything. That's why we're going. That's why we *have* to." His words rang raw, honest, and desperate. He was shaking, but not from fear—Arthur recognized it now. It was conviction.

Arthur slowed his pace only for a moment, glancing at both men, and then at Silas, who had yet to speak. The crow perched on Silas's shoulder shifted, ruffling its dark feathers as though echoing the tension in its master's chest. "Pierre's right," Arthur said, his voice heavy with a gravity that silenced the rhythm of Brand's curses. "The fires will burn, yes, and they'll spread. But children won't outrun flames or zealots. The Circle knows this, and they're counting on us being too scattered to defend them. That's what tonight is about: chaos. Distracting everyone long enough to strike where it hurts most." He adjusted the strap across his chest, the weight of his gear pressing into his ribs as he moved. "We can't save every corner of Doskvol. But we can

keep those children from becoming ashes in the Circle's ledger. And that, Brand, is where we're going."

Brand's jaw worked as though he wanted to spit a rebuttal, but the words tangled and died as Silas finally spoke, his tone quiet, deliberate, and cutting through the noise of their running boots. "He's right. We saw enough of their madness in Coalbridge. This isn't war to them—it's scripture. They want to burn the city clean." His crow gave a hollow caw, carried away by the rising night wind. "But Arthur's not wrong. You cut them where they think they're strongest, you make them bleed in the place they think untouchable. The Iron Den isn't just orphans to them—it's power. They think Ulric has something, and they'll kill every child in their path to get it." His eyes, hard and unwavering, turned to Brand. "You want to stop them? Then we go where they're headed, not where they've already been."

The bridge stretched on beneath their boots, its cracked stone echoing the pounding of their hearts. The city beyond was alive with alarms, bells tolling from towers in different districts, the shouts of men and women rising with the smoke. Pierre pulled his coat tighter around him as the wind picked up, carrying sparks like fireflies into the dusk. Brand muttered again, but this time it carried no venom, only weariness. "Kids," he said, almost to himself, as though trying to convince the war-hardened part of him that this was the right call. Pierre gave a sharp nod, determination stiffening his posture. Silas remained silent, but Arthur could feel the weight of his ally's agreement like a blade drawn at his side. Together, they ran—not for the fires they could see, but for the one place circled in red that mattered more than all the others.

The bridge spat them out into northeast Ashvale, and the world ahead looked more like a painting of hell than any city Arthur had ever known. The roundabout stood wide and open, its cobblestones gleaming under the half-light of night. At its heart, the colossal statue loomed, a marble figure of some long-forgotten general who once kept the district in order. By day, the monument commanded traffic with its outstretched arm, pointing wagons and carriages along their courses through the crowded lanes. By night, though, it was transformed. The stone surface caught every lick of flame from the burning shopfronts and homes that ringed the circle, each fire twisting its reflection into strange hues. The whites and greys of carved marble shimmered blood-red in the smoke-choked glow, a beacon that did not guide but condemned. Against the dark sky, the statue looked like it had been drenched in molten iron, its shadow long and crooked, cast over the chaos below.

Arthur slowed without realizing it, boots dragging across the cobbles, eyes locked on the carnage sprawling out before him. Soldiers of the Ember Circle raced through the streets, their silhouettes jagged with strapped satchels and firebombs slung across their backs. They looked like arsonist priests, chanting half-lines of scripture even as they tossed grenades into doorways and hurled jars of accelerant into windows. Flames answered them like choir, leaping to their hands and faces in sick devotion. A few carried metal tanks lashed to their backs, hissing hoses spitting raw fire across walls, storefronts, and anything unlucky enough to stand before them. Whole rows of houses shrieked in the roar of combustion, their wooden beams snapping in protest as they collapsed inward.

The air was alive with it—smoke choking every breath, embers drifting upward like a parody of snow, ash sticking to Arthur's lips and lashes as he stared. The stench hit him hardest: scorched timber, tar, animal fat, and the sickening whiff of flesh. People were running, stumbling out from homes that had been their only shelter, children dragged by parents too frantic to think. The narrow streets poured with a tide of the desperate, faces smeared black and red as they coughed through the haze, clutching whatever scraps they had saved from the fire. They darted around the Circle zealots, terrified prey fleeing predators who burned for the sheer joy of it. Above it all, smoke rose in great columns, drifting into the sky like banners announcing the Circle's dominion. Doskvol itself seemed to be screaming in silence.

Arthur gritted his teeth, a tremor working through his jaw as he forced himself to keep watching. Silas stood a step behind him, arms crossed, the crow on his shoulder twitching its wings as though restless from the horror of the scene. Pierre froze at Arthur's side, his youthful face washed in the reflected red of the statue's burning glow, his eyes wide and glassy with a fear that went deeper than words. His mouth worked soundlessly, as though he wanted to speak but had lost the power to. Brand swore under his breath, shaking his head in disbelief, his fingers tapping on the grip of his pistol like the rhythm alone might keep him from unraveling. For a moment, they all simply stood there—four figures on the edge of a nightmare, staring at what their city had become.

Arthur knew this wasn't war in the way the Espiritas or the Empire waged it. This was theater, spectacle. A distraction painted in fire and ash, meant to drag every guard, every fire brigade, every desperate civilian's attention here, while the Circle made their true move elsewhere. He could see it in the patterns, the way the flames spread not just for destruction but for show. They wanted eyes here, wanted panic to root itself deep in the heart of Doskvol. And it was working. Even Arthur felt it in his bones, a gnawing dread that whispered they were too few, too late, too powerless against this tide of zealotry. He tore his gaze from the burning statue, forcing his lungs to steady, forcing his mind to remember the map inked in red. This wasn't their fight. Their fight waited further ahead. But even knowing that, the sight of Doskvol burning carved itself into him, a wound he knew would never heal.

Arthur's voice cut sharp through the haze, steady even as the world around them burned. "Spread out," he ordered, his hand already moving to gesture them apart with a sweep that brooked no hesitation. "Shoot to kill." Brand hesitated, pistol halfway raised, eyes flicking across the chaos as though trying to find another way. "Kill? You sure that's—" But Pierre cut him off before Arthur had to. His voice was raw but quick, pitched high with the edge of desperation. "Killing will bring the Espiritas. They'll see this for what it is. Besides—" his lips pulled into a snarl Arthur had never seen on the boy before, "—kill those bastards before they kill innocents." That snapped it. Brand's jaw clenched, his hesitation burned away by grim necessity. Silas didn't need any words at all. He had already broken from cover, cloak snapping behind him as he slid into the shadows of a toppled wagon, his crow bursting skyward with a shrill cry to chart the battleground from above.

The sound of the first gunshot was Arthur's. The rifle kicked against his shoulder as the bullet found its mark, punching clean through the tank strapped to the back of a Circle soldier. The man stumbled, whirling as he felt the hiss of pressure and the spitting stream of fuel spilling across his side. His eyes locked onto Arthur's perch with a fanatic gleam, and then, impossibly, the man grinned. He gripped the hose of his crude flamethrower, thumbed the trigger, and sent a wave of fire roaring across the cobblestones. But the stream faltered, weakened by the leak, and in a heartbeat the spray caught the man himself. Flames whooshed up his side, racing across his torso and climbing his mask. He screamed—but not in fear. He screamed in exultation, a war-cry carried on the roar of the fire.

Arthur watched, jaw set, as the zealot staggered forward, already a man-shaped pyre. The soldier turned and charged headlong into the nearest shop, shattering its window with his shoulder. Flames spilled with him, catching on curtains, catching on shelves. A mother and her boy barely made it out the door, shrieking as the inferno swallowed what was left of their home. The soldier's death-throes had become an act of devotion, a suicide sermon in flame. Even dying, the Circle demanded to burn the city with them. Arthur pulled another round into the chamber, his teeth grinding as he snapped the bolt home. "Lunatics," he muttered under his breath, though part of him already knew that word fell short.

Brand and Pierre had found their rhythm now, both crouched behind the cracked stone lip of the roundabout. Brand leveled his pistol and fired clean, the report cracking through the night as a

Circle zealot pitched backward with a hole between his eyes. Pierre leaned into the motion, firing his own revolver a fraction late, the bullet grazing the shoulder of another soldier who shrieked and staggered behind cover. “Suppressing!” Pierre shouted, the word breaking awkward from his lips but his aim steadying with each shot. Smoke curled around his face, the glow of fire reflecting in his widened eyes. He was afraid, yes—but he was fighting.

Silas, low in his cover, snapped his rifle up to his shoulder and let off a clean, measured shot. Another Circle soldier collapsed, clutching his gut, dropping the firebomb he had been about to hurl. It rolled across the cobblestones, fizzing harmlessly in the street. The crow circled overhead, cawing its harsh warning cries, marking movements Arthur couldn’t see. Silas’s head tilted subtly, reading the bird’s language as if it were second nature. “Three moving to flank left,” he called, voice low and clipped. “Stay sharp.” His crow banked hard, its silhouette vanishing into smoke before diving back with another cry.

Arthur ducked low, the statue’s glow casting his shadow long across the cobbles as he steadied his rifle again. The world was already a roar—gunfire, firestorms, the screams of panicked civilians—and yet each shot he took seemed to cut clear through it all. He could see the Circle zealots in flashes through the smoke, masks glinting red, torches waving like banners of their holy war. And he knew, as he lined up his next shot, that this wasn’t just a skirmish. This was the opening note of something far larger, and they were only at its edge.

The fire swallowed the street in waves, heat rolling across the stone like the breath of some great beast. Pierre and Brand had pressed themselves into the cracked curve of the roundabout when the sharp whistle of glass broke the night. A bottle arced out of the smoke, turning lazy for a heartbeat before it shattered at their feet. Fuel splattered across stone and boots, and then the world erupted in a roar of flame. Pierre’s coat sleeve caught, and he flung himself backward with a shout, slapping at the sparks that licked at the fabric. Brand’s curses cracked sharp as he yanked Pierre by the collar, dragging him clear while the flames painted the street gold and red. They stumbled apart in the chaos, each forced to dive in opposite directions as the fire cut a burning line between them.

Through the smoke, Arthur’s breath caught. The heat stung his eyes, the reek of burning fuel thick in his throat, but it wasn’t the fire that rooted him—it was the voice that came from beyond it, harsh and dripping with old venom. “Arthur, is that fucking you? It is, isn’t it? Always you, bastard. Always in my way.” The sound was a blade drawn across bone, a call from a ghost he’d half-expected and half-dreaded. Arthur’s jaw clenched, eyes narrowing as he pressed his back against the charred stone, rifle steady. “Jarek!” he bellowed into the smoke, the name heavy on his tongue. “Stop this madness! You’ll burn with them if you keep this up!” His plea was answered not with words but with the crack of a rifle shot, the bullet biting sparks from the stone inches from his head. Another round tore past his ear, close enough to make the air sting.

Arthur ducked lower, his heart pounding, but the rage in him sharpened rather than shook. He reached into the satchel at his side, fingers brushing over familiar shapes until they found the smooth golden shell of his little invention. Small as a fruit, warm from the charge within, it shimmered faintly in the firelight as if it wanted release. Without hesitation he thumbed the catch, whispered a curse under his breath, and lobbed it low across the cobbles. The device rolled twice before sprouting legs, thin and sharp, snapping out from its body like a spider unfurling from sleep. The golden ball clicked and scuttled forward, darting through smoke and rubble, its legs scraping against stone with an insect’s hunger.

Arthur pressed himself back, shielding his eyes with one arm, counting under his breath as the crawlies did their work. One… two… the flash tore the night apart on three. A violent burst of white light cracked across the battlefield, brighter than any fire, a miniature sun that left the air singing. Even behind his arm, Arthur felt the sting of it in his eyelids, the flare searing through

the thin veil of skin. He grit his teeth, steadying himself, waiting for the sound that always came next.

It wasn't long. From the other side of the smoke came the panicked cry, sharp and unguarded: "Fucking spider!" The soldier's voice broke high, raw with fear, boots clattering as he stumbled back blind. Another cursed, firing wildly into the street, the bullets skipping useless sparks off the cobblestones. Arthur dropped his arm, eyes burning but clear enough to make out the shapes writhing in the flash's wake. Jarek's men clawed at their eyes, weapons waving wide arcs in the air, some firing blind, others howling in disarray. The smell of scorched powder and singed cloth wrapped thick around the moment. Arthur chambered another round, his teeth bared in a grim smile. For the first time since stepping into this hell, he felt the rhythm of the fight tilt back toward him.

The street had turned into a killing ground, the air thick with smoke and screaming metal as gunfire echoed off the facades of burning shops. Arthur ducked low behind the shattered husk of a carriage, every shot he returned answered in kind, the crack of rifles biting the night with relentless rhythm. Pierre had blood on his cheek, a thin cut from flying debris, but he still reloaded with grim focus, his jaw set hard, teeth grinding as he chambered round after round. Brand, separated from him by the wall of fire, let out a curse that rose above the chaos, his voice raw with strain as he fired wildly to keep the Circle soldiers pinned. For every man they dropped, another surged from the smoke with fire in hand, torches and bottles arcing like comets, the street itself becoming a storm of flame. The Cyphers pushed, and then were pushed back, caught in a violent pendulum where no ground was ever truly gained.

Arthur's ears rang from the near misses, sparks from ricochets peppering his coat, but he kept his aim steady, his breath even despite the hammering of his pulse. He thought they had bought themselves a sliver of space when a sudden sound tore through the din—the sharp crack of a new gun, not one of theirs, the report slightly higher, cleaner. A soldier's scream followed almost instantly, raw and shocked, echoing from the haze. "Boss!" the man howled, his voice breaking under the weight of pain. "I'm shot in the leg! It came from that direction!" Arthur snapped his head up, catching through the drifting smoke the stumble of a Circle man clutching his thigh, blood pouring through his fingers as he collapsed against the stone. His comrades swore and turned their rifles, spitting lead into the shadows on their right, desperate to snuff out the unseen shooter.

Arthur seized the opening. "Now," he hissed under his breath, and bolted from cover, boots striking sharp against cobbles as he dashed low across the street. Smoke clawed at his lungs, firelight flickered in his eyes, but he pressed forward until he skidded into the wreckage where Silas crouched with his rifle steady. Silas didn't flinch, his bird still circling overhead as he tracked enemies through the chaos. Arthur dropped beside him, breath hot in his throat. "Who is that?" he demanded, his voice cutting through the crackle of fire and the bark of rifles. Silas didn't turn, his eye still trained down the sight, finger squeezing another shot that sent a soldier spinning. He gave only the briefest shrug of his shoulders, calm even in the storm. "I don't know," he said flatly, reloading in a practiced motion. "Some kid. Came out of nowhere. Shooting at the Ember Circle, though."

Arthur blinked hard, sweat dripping down into his brow, but the words rattled him almost more than the fight itself. A kid? In this madness? He leaned out just enough to judge the direction of those mystery shots, the angle of the soldier's collapse, the way the Circle were blindly firing into the dark. His gut twisted as the thought settled heavy. That direction… the Iron Den. Could it be? Was it one of Ulric's own, refusing to bow, clawing back with whatever scraps of courage he had left? Or some desperate orphan with more fire in his veins than sense in his head? Either way, the presence of another gun on their side, however small, was tipping the scales.

The Cyphers didn’t hesitate to use it. Shots rang from multiple angles now, Arthur’s team pressing from the street while the mysterious newcomer cut into the Circle’s flank, each volley splintering their lines a little further. Jarek shouted into the smoke, his voice a whip cracking commands, but even his men were rattled, twisting and firing into every shadow, their formation broken. The street burned red, the statue at the roundabout looming like a silent witness above the chaos, its stone face bathed in firelight. Arthur chambered another round, teeth gritted as he glanced at Silas. “Whoever that kid is,” he muttered under his breath, “he just evened the odds. Let’s not waste it.” And with that, he leaned out once more, rifle steady, his finger tight on the trigger as the fight surged back into brutal rhythm.

Arthur broke from cover, his boots slamming hard against the cobblestones slick with ash and soot, the rifle tight in his hands as he sprinted through the haze. The smoke stung his eyes, his lungs burned with each ragged breath, but still he pressed on, weaving from one shattered storefront to the next, crouching only long enough to snap off a shot before throwing himself forward again. His focus was fixed on the flashes of fire ahead, where the mysterious kid’s gunfire had rattled the Ember Circle, and every step dragged him closer to that direction. Then—through the shifting clouds of smoke—he caught the movement. Another soldier, creeping from the opposite flank, his eyes locked on the same target. Arthur’s gut clenched as he saw the brute lunge, an arm shooting out to snatch the boy by the collar. The kid slipped, fast and desperate, twisting free like a shadow and vanishing through a gap between two collapsed beams, small enough for only him to squeeze through. The soldier cursed, voice low and venomous, raising his weapon to jam the muzzle down into the hole. Arthur didn’t think. He drove forward, his shoulder smashing into the man’s ribs with a bone-jarring crack, sending them both sprawling into the dirt and sparks.

The world narrowed into raw violence. Arthur and the soldier rolled across broken stone and shattered glass, their weapons clattering away as their fists became the only weapons left. The soldier snarled through gritted teeth, swinging wild, his punches hammering into Arthur’s side with the weight of a man trained to kill with his bare hands. Arthur grunted, his knuckles splitting as he landed blows against the man’s jaw, the taste of copper thick in his mouth where his lip had split open. Each strike was met with another, the two of them grappling like beasts in the mud, rolling until Arthur’s back cracked against the side of a wagon wheel. The soldier pressed the advantage, forearm grinding against Arthur’s throat, cutting off his air, the man’s breath reeking of smoke as he hissed into Arthur’s face, “Should’ve stayed in the shadows, rat.” Arthur clawed at the man’s arm, vision swimming, fury rising hot and desperate in his chest, but the brute was stronger, his weight crushing down, each second smothering Arthur closer to black.

Just as the man’s fist drew back for the finishing blow, a blur of motion struck him from behind. A scream tore from his throat as Cuzão leapt onto his back like a feral animal, his small frame coiled with rage. The boy’s face was streaked with blood and soot, his eyes wild, teeth bared in a snarl. The blade in his hand flashed once, then again, plunging down into the soldier’s back with sickening thuds. The man convulsed under the assault, his body jerking as the knife bit deep into muscle and sinew, Cuzão driving it again and again with the ferocity of someone who no longer cared about survival, only vengeance. Blood spattered across the cobblestones, across Arthur’s cheek as he shoved himself upright, the soldier’s strangled cries rising into the night before being cut short in a wet gurgle.

Arthur lunged forward, grabbing the man’s arm and wrenching it aside as Cuzão drove the blade deeper, their combined weight dragging the soldier down to the dirt. The brute thrashed once, twice, before Arthur rammed a fist into his jaw with a crack that left him slack, collapsing beneath them. The fight was over in a heartbeat, the body a twitching heap on the ground, and Arthur sucked in a breath, chest heaving, every nerve still burning from the struggle. Cuzão ripped the blade free with a snarl, his small hands trembling but his face hard, defiance glowing in his young eyes like firelight.

Before either could speak, another volley of shots tore through the smoke, bullets sparking off the wagon wheel above Arthur's head, forcing him to duck low. "Move!" Arthur barked, grabbing Cuzão by the arm and dragging him into cover. They rolled behind the overturned cart just as the Circle redirected their fury, the crack of rifles shredding the night air. Arthur pressed his back to the wood, his breath ragged, staring at the boy at his side. Cuzão's chest rose and fell fast, his blade still slick, his wide eyes locked on Arthur with a wild gleam. "You're insane," Arthur muttered under his breath, half in awe, half in fury, but there was no denying the truth—Cuzão had saved his life. The two of them crouched low, the fight still roaring around them, but together, ready to strike back from the shadows once more.

Cuzão's voice cracked as it spilled out of him, rapid and frantic, words tripping over each other like he feared each second wasted meant another friend dead. "My friends, at the orphanage. Ulric and Boquinha. Dadinho. Luis and Nico. They need help. Please—please come with me!" His chest heaved, his small frame shaking with adrenaline, blood dripping from his brow and smearing down his cheek as he clutched the knife still stained with the soldier's lifeblood. Arthur, trying to keep his own breath steady, leaned close, his voice a harsh whisper meant to cut through the storm. "Slow down, kid. You're one of Ulric's, right? They call you what? Cuzão? What's going on?" But the boy only shook his head violently, panic etched across his face, and shouted louder, as if volume itself could push them to action. "No time to talk! Follow me! My friends are being attacked right now—I need your help too!" His words rang raw and desperate, tearing through the haze of gunfire and flame.

Before Arthur could respond, Cuzão was already moving. The boy darted from cover with reckless defiance, his boots pounding against the cobblestones as he bent low, snatching up the fallen gun of the soldier they had just taken down together. He hefted it like it was forged for him, clumsy but fueled by fury, his hands steady enough to open fire back into the smoke. The shots cracked sharp, echoing between the buildings, and for a moment the Circle's advance staggered under the sudden burst. Cuzão's ferocity lit him from within; each pull of the trigger was a scream of rage unspoken, his young face hardened by firelight and grief. He slid into another cover point, moving like someone who had nothing left to lose, his voice carrying back through the smoke: "Come with me!"

Arthur felt a grim weight drop in his chest at the sight, the desperation of a boy forced into a war he had no business fighting—but fighting anyway, because the alternative was to let his world burn. The veteran in Arthur saw the recklessness, the danger, the certainty of bloodshed waiting just steps ahead. But another part of him, the part that remembered being young and desperate himself, saw the courage, saw the iron under the boy's skin. His jaw clenched as the shots around him cracked louder, tearing through the shattered remains of the storefronts. He ducked lower, teeth grinding. They couldn't abandon this child. Not tonight.

Whistling sharp and long through the smoke, Arthur called to the sky. The sound cut like a blade through the chaos, high and piercing. A black streak answered, wings beating hard against the night air as Silas's crow descended, talons clicking against the cobbles as it landed beside him. The bird's head cocked, intelligent eyes locking on Arthur's, unbothered by the roar of battle around it. In the middle of chaos, it waited with eerie patience, as though understanding every word before it was spoken. Arthur lowered his head closer to the crow, muttering through gritted teeth, "Silas. The kid. From Ulric. Take the boys—go around. Follow him. I think the attack's already happening there. I'll follow."

The crow blinked once, slow and deliberate, before giving a nod that was too human for any normal bird. With a burst of wings, it launched itself back into the smoke-choked sky, disappearing into the clouds of fire and powder to relay the message. Arthur pressed himself tighter to the crate shielding him, heart hammering, every muscle tight with the strain of holding ground. He raised his weapon, peering through the smoke where muzzle flashes lit ghostly

shapes of enemies hidden beyond. His rifle cracked, the recoil snapping back into his shoulder as he laid down covering fire. He shifted left, then right, never staying in one place, his shots precise, meant not to kill but to keep the Circle ducking, to keep their eyes on him instead of on his friends making their escape.

The Circle returned fire in fury, bullets slamming into stone and splintering wood around him, but Arthur gritted his teeth, unflinching. Each blast he sent back bought them moments. Bought Silas, Pierre, Brand—and now Cuzão—the chance to move. It was a desperate play, but desperation was the air they breathed in Doskvol tonight. With smoke filling his lungs and fire painting the streets red, Arthur braced himself, keeping the wolves at bay until his pack could reach the den that needed saving.

Arthur kept his rifle tight against his shoulder, firing controlled bursts into the smoke, each shot a heartbeat in the chaos. He heard his friends' gunfire fading away, retreating in the direction of the Iron Den. That sound gnawed at him, pulling at the part of him that wanted to follow, to make sure they made it, but he bit it down and stayed. His job now was to keep the bastards' eyes on him, to buy them every second they needed. The acrid stench of gunpowder and burning oil filled his nose, smoke cutting at his throat, but he stayed low, steady, letting instinct guide him through the firefight.

Then a voice ripped through the din, hoarse but commanding, a voice he knew well. Jarek. "Espiritas officers! Scatter!" he shouted. The order cut sharp across the street, and suddenly the battle shifted. The staccato rhythm of shots slowed, then broke off entirely. Silence crept in, broken only by the faint crackle of flames licking at broken timber. Arthur froze in place, still crouched in cover, his knuckles white around the grip of his weapon.

That was when he heard it. Hooves. The sharp, iron-clad strike of horses pounding against stone, echoing through the empty streets, growing louder, closing in. The familiar rattle of carriage wheels followed, unmistakable. Arthur's chest lifted as relief flickered through him—finally, the Espiritas, the brutal hand of order in Doskvol, the law that had teeth. They had come to shut this chaos down, to put an end to the madness.

But then his relief twisted into confusion. The sound of the carriage didn't slow. If anything, it picked up, wheels clattering hard as the horses barreled forward. Arthur frowned, ducking lower, waiting for the shouts of command, the calls for surrender, the expected roar of authority. None came. He risked a glance. They weren't stopping. Not even slowing. The carriage rushed through the street like it was blind to the flames, blind to the corpses, blind to the war. Arthur's stomach dropped. This wasn't right.

His breath hitched as the carriage thundered past his hiding place, close enough that the heat from the burning buildings lit the lacquered wood wheels. He caught the sound—laughter. Not the rough bark of soldiers in control of the situation, but sharp, cutting laughter, high and mocking, rolling out from inside like it belonged to the flames themselves. Arthur's blood ran cold.

He risked a glimpse. Inside, three men. One Espiritas officer, uniform sharp in the firelight, hands tight on the reins as he drove the horses hard through the madness. And behind him—two men in civilian clothes, their faces lit by the glow of burning Doskvol, laughing like they were watching some grand play unfold. Arthur's eyes locked, his body stiffening. Elias Wren. Sitting smug, grinning at the destruction, as if this was all just theatre for his amusement. But next to him—Arthur's chest went ice. The other man, head tilted back in a manic cackle that cut above the fire and smoke, was Merrow himself.

Merrow, alive, free, cackling at the city in flames.

Arthur’s breath caught in his throat, the sight searing itself into his mind like a brand. He could not believe his eyes, could not believe the madness of it all—Merrow, Elias, riding in an Espiritas carriage, laughing as the city burned. For a heartbeat he stood frozen, the firelight flickering across his face, painting every line of doubt and realization into sharp relief. His gaze followed the trajectory of the carriage as it barreled past, wheels hammering the stones, hooves sparking in the dark. They weren’t heading toward the Iron Den, nor toward the Hexspire, nor to the Old Port where chaos reigned. No, they were cutting the opposite way. East. Towards the great bridge that led inland. Towards Ironscar.

The realization struck him with the cold weight of iron. Ironscar Keep. The thought whispered like a curse, hollow and undeniable. In an instant it all made sense—why the Circle had thrown themselves into madness, why the city was drowning in fire and blood tonight. This wasn’t about purifying Doskvol, nor about the cult’s desperate grasp for power. It was about distraction. Every gang, every faction, even the Espiritas and the Imperials, all turned in circles, chasing smoke and embers while Merrow played the strings. The war had been provoked, the Circle unleashed, the city burning—so Merrow could move unseen, so he could carve open the prison and take back his Royal Family.

Arthur’s pulse throbbed hot in his temples as the weight of it pressed down. He had been part of it, unknowingly feeding into the game, moving just as Merrow had intended. All of them had. Every faction, every player on the board, each scrambling against each other while Merrow’s true move unfolded. The city itself would not realize until it was far, far too late. A fresh wave of anger clawed its way up through Arthur’s chest, bitter as coal smoke.

He glanced around wildly, the shouts of Circle zealots still echoing in alleys behind him, flames leaping from shopfronts and rooftops. His eyes caught on the shape of a horse, tied to a post in a narrow lane, the beast thrashing and panicked by the firestorm around it. Its eyes were wide, rolling in fear, its hooves beating the cobbles as if it too wanted to flee this nightmare. Arthur didn’t hesitate. He sprinted across the street, smoke searing his lungs, and yanked the reins free. The horse reared, shrieking, and for a moment he nearly lost it, but Arthur’s grip was iron, his voice sharp and commanding as he fought to bring the beast under control.

“Easy,” he hissed through his teeth, pulling the reins hard, steadying his body against the animal’s raw strength. For a heartbeat it threatened to throw him, hooves striking sparks, but finally it stilled, shivering with fear beneath his touch. Arthur hauled himself up into the saddle, leather creaking, cloak snapping in the night air. Ahead of him, far down the burning street, the carriage thundered towards the bridge, its lanterns bobbing like twin eyes of some mocking beast.

Arthur’s jaw clenched. There was no time for hesitation. He spurred the horse hard, and it leapt forward into the smoke, galloping down the ruined streets of Doskvol. The city roared around him, fire and screams and collapsing timber, but Arthur’s eyes were locked on that carriage. On Merrow. On the truth of the night. Merrow couldn’t be allowed to reach Ironscar. Not if Doskvol was to have any hope of surviving what came next.

Arthur urged the horse harder, weaving it through back alleys and crooked streets, the hooves striking sparks from the stones as smoke stung his eyes. He knew these routes better than most, the narrow veins of Doskvol carved into his bones after years of running them in the dead of night. The carriage ahead thundered, wheels shrieking as it took the bend, but Arthur cut across a side lane, vaulting past a fallen cart, and burst out onto the next street just as the carriage roared past. He drove his mount into its flank, leapt from the saddle in a reckless burst of momentum, and caught the side railing with both hands. The impact nearly tore his shoulder from its socket, but he hauled himself up with sheer grit, boots skidding against the wood before he swung aboard.

Elias spun first, lantern light catching the panic in his eyes as he spat out a sharp, “What the fuck—” His hand darted to the satchel of trinkets at his belt. Before he could reach one, Arthur lunged, driving his shoulder into him. They crashed against the side of the carriage, boards creaking. Merrow was already moving, a jagged knife in his hand, grin wide and teeth flashing in the red glow of firelight. He didn’t look startled—no, he looked delighted, his mad laughter ripping into the night as he lunged forward. Arthur tried to draw his revolver, but Merrow’s blade struck the barrel aside, sending the gun clattering into the street below.

The fight collapsed into chaos. Arthur snarled and pulled his own knife free, steel scraping against steel as Merrow’s blade locked with his. Their faces were inches apart, sweat, smoke, and blood mixing in the air between them. Elias, recovering from the blow, slammed a fist into Arthur’s ribs, the air bursting from his lungs, pain flaring hot. Arthur lashed out blindly, his blade cutting across Merrow’s arm, a shallow line of blood opening, but Merrow only laughed louder, the sound wild and unbroken, as if pain was nothing more than fuel.

The driver barked a curse, whipping the horses harder, the carriage rocking dangerously on the cobbles as speed climbed. Arthur shoved Merrow back with a burst of strength, only to turn and find Elias already drawing one of his trinkets—a shard of etched glass humming faintly with energy. Arthur slashed with his knife, catching Elias across the hand. The glass fell, shattering against the boards, sputtering harmless sparks. Elias screamed, clutching his palm, and Arthur spun toward the front. He lunged, driving his blade deep into the side of the Espiritas officer’s torso. But the man didn’t flinch. No gasp, no pain, just a dull, unnatural stiffness. Arthur pulled the knife back, expecting blood—but instead, a thick clump of dark mud clung to the steel before crumbling away. For a second his mind froze, unable to grasp what he had just seen.

Merrow struck from behind, a vicious arc of steel that nicked Arthur’s shoulder. The two tumbled into the center of the carriage, knives flashing, fists landing heavy. Arthur tried to pin him, tried to drive the blade into his chest, but Merrow was too quick, twisting like smoke, laughing as if the entire fight was nothing more than entertainment for him. Their knives scraped again, blades sparking in the frenzy, until Elias staggered back into it, shoving Arthur’s side. Merrow took the moment, slammed the butt of his knife across Arthur’s temple, and staggered him.

Arthur swung wildly, managing to score another line of blood along Merrow’s side, but his vision was already swimming, his body weakening from the flurry of blows. Merrow pressed close, grinning through his own blood, voice hot against Arthur’s ear as he taunted, “Hold your turn, dear boy. Tonight’s show is by invitation only—but don’t worry. There will be more.” His laughter rattled like broken glass. With a final shove, Merrow and Elias together hurled Arthur backward.

Arthur struck the railing, his hand scrabbling for purchase, wood splintering beneath his grip. For a heartbeat, he thought he had them, thought he could claw his way back up. Then Merrow’s boot slammed into his chest, sending him flying. The world turned into a blur of fire and cobblestones as he tumbled, body bouncing across the street with brutal force. The last thing he saw before the blackness swallowed him was the carriage tearing off into the night, Merrow’s laughter echoing above the chaos, riding east towards Ironscar. Then the world went dark, and Arthur’s mind went silent.

The sun blazed overhead, impossibly bright, too clean, too pure for Doskvol. Arthur blinked, disoriented, the haze thick in his head as he realized he was standing in front of a small, familiar house just a block away from Gaddcock Station. His breath caught in his throat, his chest tight. How had he gotten here? The world felt wrong, stretched thin, edges blurred like wet ink. Through the window, the shapes of two girls flickered in sunlight, their laughter faint, too distant yet achingly close. Arthur’s heart hammered, his boots dragging him forward. But no

matter how fast he walked, the house did not draw nearer, always just a few paces beyond his reach, like it had been painted onto the horizon itself.

The air changed. A low tremor first, then a deafening crack that tore reality open. Fire blossomed across the house in a single violent eruption, windows shattering outward in a storm of splinters. The roof lifted, split, collapsed in on itself as the walls screamed and buckled under the blast. Arthur staggered forward, arms outstretched, his throat tearing as he tried to shout—but no sound came. He opened his mouth again and again, but the world had stolen his voice, leaving only a silent scream as flames consumed everything. For one suspended moment, all he could see was the fire reflected in the glass, dancing over the ghostly silhouettes that no longer moved within.

He stumbled closer, his boots dragging over cobbles that no longer carried him anywhere. The house was there and gone, ash drifting like snow in the daylight. Arthur's lungs burned as if he'd swallowed smoke, his hands clawing at the air helplessly. Then came the sound—distant, muffled at first, as if rising from beneath water. A voice cutting through the ruin, sharp and insistent: "Arthur. Arthur, get up. Are you okay?"

The fire folded in on itself, walls and rubble collapsing into black. The light warped, and the sound of crackling flame bent into another noise—shouts, gunfire, boots scraping stone. The nightmare dissolved, fading like oil into water, and the world snapped back into place. Arthur blinked against the sting of smoke in his eyes, vision swimming until the street returned around him, Doskvol scarred and burning. He was on the ground, sprawled across broken cobblestones slick with blood and soot, his chest aching, his body a mess of bruises.

Hands gripped his shoulders, steadying him, lifting him upright. Silas's voice pressed close, lined with worry, his dark eyes searching Arthur's face. "Arthur, can you hear me? Stay with me." He hauled Arthur up with both arms, his frame taut with effort, as though afraid Arthur might slip back into unconsciousness if he let go. Arthur's breath rasped, shallow and uneven, his heart still caught in the echoes of fire.

Pierre's pale face loomed on one side, streaked with grime and ash, lips trembling as if he was biting back questions. Brand hovered behind him, his rifle hanging low but his eyes scanning the rooftops, jaw clenched, blood slicked across his temple. The two looked more than shaken—they looked rattled, almost broken, their youth and inexperience showing raw in that moment. For all their courage, Doskvol's war had a way of grinding boys into men with a cruelty no training could blunt.

Arthur pressed his palm into the cobblestones, forcing his legs beneath him, his body heavy and sluggish. His knife was still in his grip, dried mud clinging to the steel, and for an instant he wasn't sure if it was dream or memory. He rose slow, his voice rough, hollow. "Where am I?" The question wasn't just confusion; it carried the weight of the nightmare still clinging to him.

Silas steadied him, one hand braced on his arm, the other ready on his pistol. His reply came low, clipped with urgency but lined with a tremor Arthur wasn't used to hearing. "In the middle of the street, you mad man. What happened?" The air around them was thick with smoke, the echoes of battle still ringing, but in that moment, everything narrowed to the question—and Arthur's silence, as the nightmare of fire still smoldered inside his mind.

Arthur's breath steadied as fragments of the nightmare burned away and the present came crashing back into him. The war. The fire. The children. Merrow. He was on a mission, not wandering through dreams, and the urgency clamped down on him like iron shackles. His eyes darted around the empty street, noticing how the chaos had died. The gunfire was gone, the screams had ebbed, and the only sound was the faint crackle of fire in the distance. It was too quiet, unnaturally so. His stomach twisted as the thought struck: *how long had I been out?* His

lips parted, dry and rough. “The kids, Silas…” he began, the words heavy in his throat. But Silas cut him off, his tone tight but steady, carrying the weight of what he had to say. “We got there too late, Arthur. But the kids are safe. The boy—Cuzão—he contacted the Crows before he ever found us. They got the children out.”

Arthur’s body surged forward, trying to rise too fast, his legs trembling beneath him until Silas steadied him again. His jaw clenched, teeth grinding against the frustration burning in his chest. “And the Circle? Emberwing?” he pressed, voice low but taut with urgency. This time, Brand answered from behind, his voice carrying a strange edge—part relief, part disbelief. “Emberwing is dead. As far as we can tell.” The young man’s rifle hung loose in his grip, smoke and grime smeared across his features. Pierre, jittery with adrenaline and too much energy left over from the fight, jumped in with his own answer, his words tumbling over each other in haste. “Ulric's a mad lad, Arthur. Absolute lunatic. Once the kids were out, he rigged the whole place to blow. Took the Circle soldiers with it. The orphanage went up in flames, half of it airborne—I swear it was like something out of a story. We dragged Ulric from the rubble ourselves. He lived.”

Arthur froze at that, a hollow ache cutting through him. Relief that the children lived, tempered by the horror of what Ulric had been forced to do—what a boy had been pushed to carry on his back. But Silas’s voice came again, sharper, more cautious, as he shook his head. “Don’t believe too quickly. I didn’t see a body. Not Emberwing’s. Not even a scrap. The place was leveled, yes, but I can’t swear he’s gone. Men like him… they don’t die easy.” His eyes glinted in the dim firelight, his crow circling above as though it could feel his unease. The others fell silent, the weight of that possibility pressing heavy over all of them.

Arthur groaned low, but forced himself upright with the help of Silas and Pierre, every muscle stiff and aching. His knife was still slick with mud, that strange vision still burning at the edges of his mind, but he pushed it aside. His face was hard, expression carved into something grim and unyielding. “Let’s go home,” he said at last, his voice quiet but resolute. “Today we lost a lot more than we imagine.” His words were not just for the orphanage, not just for the children, but for the city itself, for the war that was now clawing its way open on all fronts.

They began the long walk back, their boots heavy against the cobbles, the smoke of Doskvol curling around them like a funeral shroud. The city groaned in the distance, alive with fire and chaos, each district bleeding its own tragedies into the night. Along the way, Arthur spoke in clipped tones, his voice low so it carried only to the men beside him. He told them of the carriage, of Elias Wren laughing like a jackal in the shadows, of Merrow himself reveling in the destruction while the city tore itself apart. He told them of the smoke screen they had all unknowingly played into, the illusion of battle hiding the real play.

And then, when their eyes lifted toward the horizon, the truth revealed itself. Beyond the smoke of burning streets, beyond the fractured skyline of Doskvol, a single black column rose—thick, massive, unmistakable—curling up from the direction of Ironscar Keep. The fortress of stone and iron was hidden behind the haze of distance, but the sky told its tale well enough. Arthur and his men stared, their silence louder than any curse. The terror of Doskvol had not just survived the night—it was gathering power again. Merrow Valesque was free to move his pieces, and the war he wanted was no longer in whispers. It was here. And there was no stopping it now.

News: Fires of Chaos - The Day Horror Descended on Ashvale

Elara Voss: *"Doskvol was thrown into disarray yesterday as a series of barbaric attacks ripped through the heart of Ashvale, leaving both citizens and authorities stunned by the scale and brutality of the violence."* She paused, her eyes narrowing at the newspaper spread out before her. "You know, I knew it was going to be bad when we got that call for help from the Crows. But reading it now, seeing it in print... it's another thing entirely. And to think the Cyphers even offered to help, though they were too far to make it in time."

Thane Draven: *"The simultaneous explosion at Ironscar Keep added another grim layer to the day's events..."* he read aloud, shaking his head. "That whole thing was a mess, wasn't it? But what really catches my attention is this bit about a hot-air balloon and *'bearing the colours and emblem of a known criminal faction.'* They're pointing fingers at the Gloam Sisters, right? But they don't outright say it. It's like they're suggesting it without actually incriminating them. It's... it's clever."

Elara Voss: "You noticed that too, huh? They're implying just enough to make the Gloam Sisters look guilty without committing. Typical Blade Chronicle trickery. The Crows were deep in this mess, Thane. I wonder how much pull they have with the Blade Chronicle. Makes you think, doesn't it?"

Thane Draven: "So you think the Crows have connections in the press? Wouldn't surprise me. *'As Ashvale and the rest of Doskvol reel from these attacks, questions are being raised about the effectiveness of the Imperial Police."'* He read the line aloud, almost mockingly. "The Crows have never been fans of the authorities. Wouldn't take much to grease a few palms and make the police look incompetent while keeping their own hands clean."

Elara Voss: She tapped the table with her fingers, her brow furrowing. "It's not just about making the Imperial Police look bad, Thane. This entire setup—especially with the balloon carrying the Gloam Sisters' colours—it's calculated. It's not them, I'm sure of it. The Gloam Sisters are many things, but reckless isn't one of them. They're being framed." She paused, her eyes flickering with a hint of admiration. "And quite frankly, it's a smart move by Emberlash. He knew the exact buttons to press."

Thane Draven: "Yeah, I suppose. I mean, the article goes on to say, *'Many believe that the emblem was that of the infamous Gloam Sisters. The involvement of such a shadowy and mystical faction raises questions about their motives."'* He shook his head. "They're definitely being thrown under the carriage for this one. But what I don't get is why. What does Emberlash gain from blaming the Sisters?"

Elara Voss: "It's about positioning, Thane." Elara leaned back, her gaze distant as she thought it through. "Think about it. If Emberlash shifts the blame to the Gloam Sisters, he not only puts more pressure on them—potentially taking out a rival—but he also confuses the rest of us. Who do we fight? Who do we side with? The Gloam Sisters are already distrusted by most of Doskvol. Throwing them under suspicion for something like this just makes it harder for any of their allies to come to their defence. It's chaos. And Emberlash thrives on chaos."

Thane Draven: "You think the Crows are playing both sides? It feels like they're part of this whole mess too, but they get off scot-free in the article. Almost makes it seem like they're the heroes for being there."

Elara Voss: She snorted, a wry smile playing on her lips. "Oh, they're in it, alright. But heroes? No. They're just trying to survive like the rest of us. And maybe, just maybe, they're trying to get a foothold where they can. The Crows aren't the type to take sides unless there's something to be gained from it." She paused, looking down at the printed words once again. "They could be working with the Gloam Sisters or against them. I wouldn't put it past Jack to play both angles if it means keeping his people safe."

Thane Draven: Thane's eyes glinted with amusement. "Heh. *'For now, the streets of Ashvale remain under heavy surveillance... But as the smoke clears and the damage is assessed, one thing remains clear—Doskvol's fragile peace has been shattered.'*" He closed the paper and sighed. "They're right about that. Fragile peace, indeed. And I'd wager this isn't the last we hear of it."

Elara Voss: "No, it isn't," Elara agreed, her expression darkening. "We'll have to tread carefully, Thane. The Crows, Emberlash, the Gloam Sisters... They're all playing a dangerous game, and we're caught right in the middle. But one thing's for sure." She looked at her subordinate, her eyes cold. "If the Ember Circle thinks they can get away with something like this without retribution, they're dead wrong. We need to be ready to act, regardless of where the pieces fall."

Thane Draven: Thane grinned, a spark of excitement in his eyes. "Then let's give 'em hell, Elara. Let's show Emberlash that Doskvol isn't his playground, and that the Ember Circle isn't untouchable."

Elara Voss: Elara gave a firm nod, her expression resolute. "Agreed. But remember, Thane—we don't just go rushing in. We need information, leverage, and allies. We need to be smart about this." She looked out towards the bustling street beyond their small hideout, the echoes of Doskvol's chaos never far away. "We move when the time is right. And when we do, they won't know what hit them."

Thane Draven: He tapped the edge of the paper with his finger, his brow furrowed. "Here it is—the part that rattled me most. '*Explosion at Ironscar Keep… thirty-one inmates attempted to escape… twenty-three caught, eight unaccounted for.*' And look at the names, Elara. These aren't petty thieves. This is Merrow's old crew. The Royal Gang. I thought they were buried for good when he got locked away."

Elara Voss: Her eyes narrowed as she reread the column, lips pressing into a thin line. "*Edwin Grieves, Victor Crowe, Mitchell Marlowe, Felix Coyle, Callum Dorne, Branagh Vey…*" She recited the names slowly, almost tasting them like poison. "That's not coincidence, Thane. Out of all the hundreds rotting in Ironscar, it just so happens that Merrow's lieutenants are the ones who slip the net? No. Someone wanted them free. And if you ask me, Merrow himself had a hand in it. One way or another, this was his play."

Thane Draven: He leaned back in his chair, exhaling sharply, the chair legs creaking under him. "So you think Merrow's back in the game? Thought he was a ghost story, locked away and waiting for the gallows. Now, with his old dogs off the leash, it feels like the city's about to choke on that ghost all over again." He gave a humorless chuckle. "Royal Gang tearing through Doskvol again… Saints save us."

Elara Voss: She shook her head, voice hard. "Don't fool yourself, Thane. This isn't the Royal Gang of old—not yet. But Merrow doesn't need his full army to sow chaos. Just the names alone bring fear back to the streets. He thrives on that. The Ember Circle light the matches, and Merrow fans the fire until no one knows who's really pulling the strings. It's a clever mask. The Circle take the blame, the Sisters take suspicion, the Police take the shame… and Merrow rebuilds his kingdom in the shadows."

Thane Draven: His lips twisted into a smirk, though his eyes betrayed unease. "City barely recovered from his last circus, and now the clowns are back on the street. Eight of them, scattered who knows where. That's enough to make any district bleed. If Merrow really is free—or even if he's just pulling wires from a hole in the ground—Doskvol's about to relive its worst nightmare." He tapped the paper once more, his tone darkening. "Mark my words, Elara. This isn't just smoke and chaos. This is the opening act."

With a shared understanding, the two fell into silence, each already thinking of what their next move would be in the intricate game of power and survival that Doskvol had become.

Part IV – Masks and Mirrors…

Chapter 05: **Whispers in Vida Nova**

The library of the Gloam Sisters was never still, no matter how silent it appeared at first glance. The second floor sprawled like a cathedral of dust and shadows, its shelves stretching up toward ceilings lost in gloom, every ladder and balcony crooked in strange angles that felt older than the city itself. Syloki had tucked herself into one of the corners, a crooked desk dragged half out of alignment with the rows, her posture hunched over like a conspirator caught in her own thoughts. The air was thick with the smell of old parchment, binding glue, and candle wax burned too long, the kind of scent that clung to your lungs until you tasted ink on your tongue. Before her was a scatter of books she had no right to check out without permission—treatises on the history of magic, obscure essays on spectral bindings, half-torn volumes about Doskvol's oldest wards—and folded beneath them like contraband, the most recent issue of the *Blade Chronicle*, its headline still bold despite being half-buried. Between the spines and the rustling pages sat her mug of tea, steam curling in quiet defiance of the rules, and in her lap, concealed just enough, lay the little diary she wasn't meant to keep, pages already crowded with secrets too heavy to say aloud.

Her quill scratched across the paper, thin lines tracing a web of names and places she had been piecing together for weeks. Elias Wren. Olly. Merrow. Lira. The Painted Widow. Beside them, she had written fragments of the things she had heard or seen, the Widow's broken phrases pressed into her memory with more weight than any printed book could manage. Every note she added felt less like solving a puzzle and more like cornering herself inside a room of mirrors, each reflection pointing back at a truth she was not yet ready to face. Her tea sat cooling to her side, ignored more often than sipped, the steam rising like a warning flare against the quiet. At one point her quill hesitated, her hand faltering as her eyes caught on a name she didn't expect to linger on, but always did: *Arthur Xavier.* A little note beneath it, almost embarrassed in how plainly she'd written it — *Friendly. Quiet type. Kinda cute.* — almost hidden between lines of ciphered notes. The library seemed to lean closer when she read in silence, the books pressing in around her as if they, too, listened. Shadows pooled in the corners, thick and watchful, each candle flicker making them twitch like restless fingers. She flipped open a book on the application of binding runes and found herself skimming more than reading, her mind caught instead on the threads she had already collected. The Widow's words about Barrowcleft burned on the page no matter what she tried to distract herself with. She scribbled them down again in the diary, underlined twice, then stared at them until the letters blurred. *Barrowcleft burned because of him… because of him and the one who smiled beside him.* The thought of Lira, with her carefully painted rage and her secrets stuffed away in dusty portraits, rose unbidden. Syloki chewed her lip until she tasted iron, fingers tightening around the quill.

Her tea had gone cold by the time she finally reached for it, lifting the mug with a care she did not usually bother with, terrified of spilling even a drop in this sacred, untouchable room. She sipped, the taste gone bitter from neglect, and grimaced as she set it down too quickly, the ceramic clinking against the wood. The sound carried louder than it should have in the vast chamber, and she froze, her breath catching in her throat as though one of the Sisters might materialize between the shelves at any moment. The silence pressed back, but nothing stirred, and slowly, cautiously, she reached for her quill again. The diary remained on her lap, half-hidden by the sweep of her cloak, its open page crowded with arrows and lines connecting names like a hunter mapping tracks. She bent closer, the candlelight catching her pale hair, her lips moving faintly as though sounding out the names to herself, committing them not just to paper but to memory.

Syloki's gaze drifted to the highest shelves, where volumes she could not yet reach seemed to brood down at her like judges weighing her worth. She felt small beneath them, a trespasser daring to pull threads from tapestries older than her bloodline, yet the compulsion to continue gnawed at her bones. She rubbed at her temples with ink-stained fingers, smearing a faint mark across her cheek without noticing, then returned to her notes, jaw tight, eyes sharp with a determination that bordered on desperation. She knew she should stop. She knew the Sisters would not forgive her if they saw the shape of her private notes. But every time she thought about closing the diary, she heard the Widow's words again, scraping across her skull like claws. She had no choice but to keep digging.

Syloki reached across the clutter of her desk and slid the folded *Blade Chronicle* free from beneath the stack of tomes, the paper crackling faintly in her hands as though it resented being hidden away. The ink was still sharp enough to stain her fingertips, headlines bold and accusatory, the kind that demanded to be read even when she had no stomach for it. She smoothed it flat against the wood, her eyes flicking over the blocky letters—*Fires of Chaos: The Day Horror Descended on Ashvale*—before they began to skim through the article, pulling at the threads that mattered most to her. Iron Den Orphanage. Soup Kitchen. Ironscar Keep. All targets at once, a storm unleashed like clockwork, and buried in the smoke and fire, a name that should have stayed shackled in memory: the Royal Gang. Syloki's breath tightened as she read the list of those escaped, the syllables of Grieves, Crowe, Marlowe, Coyle, Dorne, and Vey crawling across her skin like spiders. They were names that had hung in whispers of old terror, and now they were walking free again. It was impossible not to wonder if this whole spectacle—the fires, the chaos, the carefully staged brutality—was only smoke and theatre to cover the true act: Merrow calling his monsters back to him.

She leaned back into her chair, the wood creaking beneath her weight, the paper trembling slightly in her hands as she tightened her grip. The Sisters had been talking of nothing else for days, their voices hushed but frenzied in every corridor, every chamber heavy with speculation and dread. To them, this was not simply news—it was omen. She could still hear the ripple of it in the walls, like the house itself remembered their words and kept repeating them in secret. Her lips pressed thin as she thought of Lira, how the whispers said she had flown into one of her rages when the report was first brought to her. Spells hurled without aim, fire and shadow bursting against stone and glass, her fury turning indiscriminate until even her own sisters had bled under her wrath. Sheila had spoken of it with a shaken voice, describing how she had patched up one of the women, scalp torn open, hair stiff with dried blood, the mark of Lira's magic burned across her skin. Syloki had listened, sickened but silent, secretly thankful she had not been in the room that day.

The thought of Lira's rage settled heavy on her chest, making her fingers twitch against the Chronicle's pages. She knew already that the name Merrow was enough to poison the woman's composure, but hearing that she had lost control so completely that her own people suffered—it sharpened Syloki's suspicion into something more dangerous. The Widow's words returned like claws in her ears: *the one who smiled beside him.* Every sign pointed back to Lira, no matter how desperately Syloki wanted to pretend otherwise. If Lira had truly been there—if she had truly stood in the wings while fire swallowed Barrowcleft—then her violence now was not just hatred, it was guilt curdling into venom. Syloki stared at the names of the escaped Royal Family, her pulse beating a little faster, as though she could already see them gathering in the shadows of Doskvol, waiting for the curtain to rise once more.

She ran her thumb along the paper's edge until it sliced a thin sting into her skin, the sharpness jolting her back into the present. The Chronicle lay open before her like a stage set, every word another piece of script written for the audience of Doskvol, yet Syloki knew better than most how often the script was a lie. Fire at Ashvale. Explosions at Ironscar. The Sisters muttered of the Ember Circle, of foreign agents, of enemies from across the Void Sea—but to Syloki, the truth

hid in plainer sight. This was Merrow's handwriting. His kind of theatre. The way he had always blurred the line between spectacle and slaughter. She thought of the Widow's vision, of the stage, the clapping, the orchestrated performance, and it all rang the same. Maybe the Circle had lit the first torch, but Merrow had been waiting in the wings, ready to step back into the light when no one was watching.

Her gaze drifted toward the folded corner of the page where Tobias Ford's name was printed in passing, a footnote of the city's reshaping power, never quite center but never fully absent either. It burned at her like a signal flare. Tobias, with his Hotel Vida Nova, rising in Hexspire exactly where Merrow's shadow had once danced. A new front, a new stage, this time draped in legitimacy instead of blood. The Sisters knew of his involvement with the Crows, and they were already watching the move with suspicion, but Syloki felt the weight of her secret curling tighter. She could not share what she knew, what she suspected—not yet, not with anyone. These were seeds only she could plant, and the soil was too poisoned for careless hands. She folded the Chronicle back, slower now, and tucked it once more beneath her stack of books, though its words still echoed in her skull.

Her tea had gone stone cold, the mug untouched, the faint curl of steam long since faded, but she found herself reaching for it anyway, cradling it between her palms as if the heat might still be there. She took a sip, grimacing at the bitterness, but held it longer this time, grounding herself against the taste. The Sisters might believe the Circle's attack was the whole story, but Syloki felt the truth like a knife pressed to her ribs: the Circle may have brought fire, but Merrow had brought back his family. And Doskvol had no idea the curtain was only just rising.

Syloki's quill scratched lightly against the diary page, the words forming in her slanted hand beneath the weak glow of the library lamp. The ink bled slightly into the paper as she wrote down the names—Edwin Grieves, Victor Crowe, Mitchell Marlowe, Felix Coyle, Callum Dorne, Branagh Vey—and then she paused, the list feeling unfinished, incomplete like a puzzle missing its edges. She tapped the feather against her lip, then lowered it again, pulling from the darker corners of her memory. There had been others. Saul "the Butcher" Kells, whose knife collection was whispered about in the alleys; Irena Varele, once a torch singer who had burned her rivals both figuratively and literally; Rook Marlen, a gambler whose debts had been paid in bodies; Elias Keene, the forger who never spoke above a whisper, even when he cut a throat. And at the bottom of the list, she wrote a name that felt more myth than man—Mister Smile. Just the name itself made her stomach shift uneasily, the way it had always been spoken in the gutters: a grinning phantom in the Royal Family, never truly confirmed, but never denied either. She stared at it for a moment longer, then shut the diary halfway, shielding it with her elbow as though someone might be reading over her shoulder.

She hadn't even heard Sheila approach. Only when the soft creak of the chair beside her broke the quiet did she startle, her eyes flicking to the side to see the familiar tumble of blonde hair and those striking blue eyes peering at her with a mix of warmth and mischief. Sheila grinned as she sat, setting her own mug down on the table, and leaned her chin into her hand like they had been sharing the space together all evening. "You're getting better at hiding your scribbles, Sy," she whispered, her tone lilting with humor. "But not good enough to fool me. What are you working on this time? Don't tell me it's another one of those dreary tomes on canal tax records." Syloki gave a faint smile, closing the diary fully now and slipping her hand over the cover in an almost casual way. "Nothing so boring. Just… trying to untangle my thoughts. It helps to put them down." She glanced at Sheila's curious look and added lightly, "And you move like a ghost, Blue-Eyes. One day you'll scare me right out of my skin."

Sheila laughed, soft enough to keep the sound tucked in the library's heavy air, and shook her head. "Scaring you would be impossible. You'd probably stare me down and make me apologize before I even opened my mouth." She leaned back in her chair, stretching her legs under the

table, her boot brushing against Syloki's in that absentminded way she always had when comfortable. "But really, I wanted to see how you've been. Since the Widow." Her voice softened at that, no more humor in it now, only that searching gentleness she seemed to keep reserved just for Syloki. "You looked… different after. Still do, if I'm being honest."

Syloki felt her throat tighten, but she forced her voice to stay even, her hands resting neatly over the diary so Sheila would not see them tremble. "I've been… well, as well as one can be in a house that's always whispering. The Widow left her mark, that much I'll admit." She let her gaze linger on the teacup in front of her, the cold dregs of liquid inside reflecting the light, before she added in a quieter tone, "But I'm still here, Blue-Eyes. Still standing. That's more than I expected some nights." The honesty surprised even her, though carefully framed—it spoke to her survival, not the storm of secrets running beneath it.

Sheila tilted her head, studying her, her lips quirking in a half-smile that didn't quite mask the worry in her eyes. "Still standing, huh? That's good. That's strong. I was afraid I'd lost part of you that night. The way you looked after…" She trailed off, then gave a tiny shrug, as though shaking the weight away. "I'm glad you're still here. And you know if you ever need—" She stopped herself again, biting her lip, then tried for cheerfulness. "If you ever need a drink, or a bad joke, I've got plenty to go around."

Syloki couldn't help the soft laugh that slipped from her, the sound surprising in her own ears. "You're terrible at jokes, Blue-Eyes. But I'll take the drink." She reached for her mug again, though the tea had long gone bitter and cold, and she raised it in a small, mock-toast before taking a sip. "It helps more than you think, having someone who asks. And who listens." Her smile faded into something softer, quieter, as she met Sheila's gaze. For a moment, she wondered if Sheila saw too much—but she pushed the thought away, letting the warmth of their little bubble of laughter settle between them like a shield against the shadows pressing in.

Sheila tapped her mug against Syloki's in a playful clink, her grin wide enough to brighten even this dim, towering library. "Then we'll just have to keep drinking, Sy. Until the ghosts get bored of us." Syloki smirked faintly at that, but in her chest, the shadows of her investigation coiled tighter, guarded and silent. Some things could never be spoken aloud, not even to blue eyes kind enough to ask.

Sheila leaned back in her chair, eyes sparkling with mischief as she tapped her mug against the edge of the table, pretending like something had just popped into her head. The act was so terribly obvious that Syloki immediately snorted, covering her grin with her hand. "Oh, Saints above, Blue-Eyes, don't even start with that look," Syloki teased, shaking her head. "You're not fooling anyone. You came here with a whole speech rehearsed, didn't you?" Sheila widened her eyes, feigning innocence, but the corner of her mouth betrayed her with a twitch. "Who, me? Rehearse? Please. I'm all natural charm. But—" she dragged the word out dramatically, "—since you caught me, I might as well tell you. I've been assigned another mission, Sy. And I need a partner. Want to stretch those legs of yours in some fresh air?"

Syloki leaned back in her chair, lifting a brow with exaggerated suspicion. "Mmh, that depends," she said with mock-seriousness, her lips curving into a slow smile. "Are there going to be any cuties where we're going? Because, you know, my time is very valuable." She fluttered her fingers in the air as if she were some highborn lady refusing a ball, and both of them burst into laughter, the sound bubbling up and breaking the heavy stillness of the library. Sheila shook her head, laughing so hard her eyes watered, and managed to choke out, "Oh, Saints, you kill me. Only you could make an assignment sound like a trip to the Silkbend." Syloki wagged a finger at her, grinning. "I take my priorities very seriously, Blue-Eyes."

Sheila leaned in conspiratorially, lowering her voice as though they were sharing the most scandalous gossip. “You know about that new hotel, right? They say it’s modest but decent—two stars if you’re being generous. Vida Nova, over in Hexspire.” Syloki tilted her head, eyes narrowing thoughtfully before she hummed. “Vida Nova, huh. Run by that Tobias fella, isn’t it? Word is he’s tangled up with the Crows somehow. You sure this isn’t more than just ‘fresh air,’ Blue-Eyes?” She raised her brow in that sly way she had, her smirk tugging wider.

Sheila gave an exaggerated shrug, playing at innocence again but failing to hide the glint in her eye. “That’s the word in the manor, alright. I’ve been tasked with sniffing around, making sure the walls don’t hide more than wallpaper. Thought it might be more fun if I dragged you along as my plus one.” She winked, and Syloki felt the perk of her pulse quicken despite herself. “Well, hell yes,” Syloki said, almost too fast, then caught herself and tried to play it cool, leaning back with arms crossed. “I mean… yes, fine, I suppose I could fit it into my very busy schedule of drinking tea and brooding over dusty tomes.”

Sheila grinned, triumphant, her voice bubbling with amusement. “I knew it. You’re impossible to resist when there’s mischief brewing. Besides—” she nudged Syloki’s elbow with her own, teasing, “—maybe you can get close to that Tobias, hm? Entrepreneur, respectable front, probably desperate to prove himself to anyone who’ll listen. Hopefully a good guy, but who knows? Maybe he’s your type.” The laugh that broke from Syloki came quick and loud, and she shook her head, wiping at her eyes with the back of her sleeve. “Oh, don’t you start matchmaking me with every two-star hotelier that sneezes, Blue-Eyes. But Saints, you’re right—we both know I could use that. Girl, when was the last time anyone was remotely decent?”

Syloki rested her elbow on the table, chin propped against her hand, her gaze fixed on Sheila with that sharp, half-amused squint she often wore when testing someone’s plan. “What’s your plan for the mission?” she asked finally, her voice low, almost a murmur, but with a spark of intrigue curling at the edges. Sheila leaned in immediately, her whole body buzzing with conspiratorial energy, her blue eyes glittering in the candlelight. “I’ll pose as a hotel reviewer,” she whispered, like the idea itself was scandalous. “I’ll ask about the hotel’s amenities and services, play the curious guest, while subtly pressing into Tobias’s connections. We can nudge, prod, let him talk himself into knots. And if he’s tied to anyone in any way, maybe he’ll slip.”

Syloki tilted her head, lips curving in a sly smile as she tapped her finger against the rim of her teacup. “I like that idea,” she said, the words curling off her tongue with measured approval. Her mind was already racing ahead, piecing together angles, shadows, the paths Tobias might stumble down if pushed right. “Tobias might lower his guard with a friendly visitor. Everyone wants their new business talked about. And if you ask the right questions, Blue-Eyes, we might unearth more than just what brand of linens he’s using.” Her smirk lingered, wry and knowing, though the edge of calculation never left her eyes.

“Exactly!” Sheila replied, her grin blooming wide, a flash of warmth and determination lighting up her face. She thumped her fist softly against the tabletop as though sealing the plan right there between their books and tea. “I’ll handle the charm and the small talk—you know that’s my strength. You just keep those hawk eyes of yours wide open, watching, listening, pulling the threads I might miss. You’re better at seeing what’s not said.” Her voice carried a bubbling confidence, but underneath, there was a steady weight, the trust she placed in Syloki without hesitation.

Syloki sat back, her smirk softening into something almost earnest, a rare drop of her guard. “Trust me, I’ll be listening carefully,” she said, her voice quieter now, a promise edged with steel. “Every word, every twitch of his hand. People show themselves if you wait long enough. This is a chance to grab something solid, something we can use. But we need to tread careful. Lira is

vigilant, and if she even sniffs suspicion on me…" She let the thought trail off, her eyes flicking briefly to the books stacked around her, then back to Sheila. "It'll land us both in a pit deeper than we can climb."

Sheila reached across the table, her hand brushing the edge of Syloki's notebook but stopping just short of touching it, her blue eyes steady and full of that unwavering brightness that always made Syloki feel like the world wasn't quite as heavy. "Don't worry," she said, her voice gentler now but no less sure. "I've got your back, Sy. Always. We'll go in together, cover each other like we always do. Let Lira rage and the rest of the Sisters scheme—we'll be out there doing what needs to be done." She smiled, soft but certain, and for a moment the weight of their dangerous world lightened under it, just enough for Syloki to exhale.

Syloki let out a low chuckle, shaking her head as she muttered, "Blue-Eyes, you're either going to keep me alive or get me killed faster than anyone else. Saints help me, I haven't figured out which." Sheila laughed at that, a bright ripple breaking through the thick quiet of the library, and it felt like the walls themselves leaned closer, listening to the secrets they were weaving in the dark.

The fog lay heavy over Hexspire, curling thick around the jagged silhouettes of crumbling spires and leaning rooftops, muting the city into a palette of greys and sickly amber lanternlight. It clung to every stone, to every flickering lamp, to the slick cobbles underfoot that glistened faintly as if they still carried the memory of rain. Here, on the northeastern edge of the district, the streets were quieter than most—far from the clamorous docks and the constant rumble of factories, the silence here carried an almost reverent weight. It was the kind of silence that seemed to hold its breath, waiting to see if anyone dared disturb it. Out of that stillness, two figures appeared, walking side by side down the narrow street with the deliberate pace of those who carried purpose in a city that loved to pry.

Syloki drew her coat tighter around herself, the hem brushing just above her boots, her eyes sharp beneath the sweep of dark hair that fell across her face. Every step was measured, her head angled slightly downward as if studying the cobbles, but her gaze was restless, flicking constantly to the windows, the doorways, the shadowed alleys. Beside her, Sheila walked with a brightness that cut the fog, her stride confident, her cropped blonde hair catching the lanternlight here and there as she moved. She had that restless energy that seemed to hum in her veins, hands shifting between swinging loose at her sides and tucking back into her coat pockets. Where Syloki was shadow and sharpened lines, Sheila was movement and warmth, and together they cut a striking contrast against the muted canvas of the district.

Ahead, Hotel Vida Nova rose from the mist, modest in height yet standing proud against the sagging backdrop of Hexspire. Its stone and timber facade was neat, the walls scrubbed cleaner than anything around it, the flower boxes beneath its windows still fresh with soil, ready for blooms to come. A single lantern glowed above the door, its flame steady, not wavering despite the damp air, as if it had been placed there to ward off the gloom itself. The sign swung gently in the light breeze, the name painted in gold letters that caught even the weakest light: *Vida Nova*. It was not grand, not ostentatious, but it radiated an air of quiet defiance, as though to say: here, there is a place untouched by the rot, a new life carved out of the ashes of the old.

Syloki slowed as they approached, her eyes narrowing on the lanternlight, on the way the stonework stood straighter than the surrounding ruins, on how deliberately the place had been made to stand apart. "Well," she muttered under her breath, voice low enough for Sheila alone, "someone certainly wants to make a statement." Her tone was dry, edged with suspicion, though her eyes betrayed the faintest flicker of curiosity. Sheila's lips curved into a grin, her voice

playful as she leaned slightly closer. “A statement’s better than the usual ruin. Look at it, Sy—it actually looks… hopeful. Saints, when’s the last time we saw hopeful in this city?” She laughed softly, shaking her head, her breath visible in the chill.

The street itself was mostly deserted, the only sounds the faint drip of water somewhere unseen and the occasional creak of timber in the mist. A stray cat slinked along the edge of the building opposite, its eyes catching the lanternlight for a brief, eerie flash before it vanished into shadow. No other travelers stirred, no voices carried from the nearby alleys. It was as if the district itself was pausing, watching the two women approach this new beacon planted in its midst. The stillness carried weight, the kind that made Syloki’s skin prickle with unease. She adjusted her scarf and glanced sidelong at Sheila, who seemed unbothered by the silence, her grin widening as she nodded toward the entrance.

“Come on,” Sheila whispered, her tone buoyant yet laced with that conspiratorial thrill she always carried into their mischief. “Fresh air, fresh start. Two stars or not, it’s still better than choking in that damned library.” Her laughter was hushed but bright, brushing away the weight of the mist as she reached out to nudge Syloki forward with her elbow. Syloki snorted softly at that, her smirk brief but real, and together they stepped closer to the lantern’s glow, the shadows of Hexspire following like watchful eyes as they crossed into the threshold of Hotel Vida Nova.

The lantern’s glow followed them in only for a moment before the door shut behind, and the world inside pressed in, warmer but faintly stale, like wood polish layered over damp stone. The reception hall was modest, with pale plaster walls and timber beams that had clearly been scrubbed and polished for the occasion. A vase of wilted flowers sat on a small table near the door, their petals browned at the edges, trying and failing to brighten the room. A faded rug lay across the middle of the floor, its pattern worn to smudges by heavy boots. The whole place felt caught between care and neglect, a building that wanted to be proud but couldn’t quite hide the cracks in its smile. Syloki’s lips curled faintly downward as her gaze roamed, taking everything in, filing it away with the meticulous attention that had become second nature.

Behind the counter stood Merenda Petersens, tall and upright, her figure sharp against the backdrop of the polished desk. She moved with the kind of stillness that came from control, every tilt of her head deliberate, her posture precise. Her hair was swept back neatly, her clothes without wrinkle, and her eyes—dark, cutting—slid over the two women as if measuring their worth before she even spoke. “Welcome to Hotel Vida Nova,” she said at last, her voice low and smooth, carrying the faint edge of someone who asked more questions than they answered. “How may I assist you today?”

Sheila was already stepping forward, her boots clicking lightly across the rug, her smile wide enough to beam. “Hi! I’m Sheila Crawford,” she announced, her tone full of practiced brightness. “I’m here for a review for a travel magazine. I’ve heard some very interesting things about your hotel, and I thought I’d stop in to see it for myself.” She leaned casually against the counter, elbows propped, chin tilted just so, like she was already rehearsing the role of charmer. Syloki, standing just behind, folded her arms and let her gaze drift past the two women, sweeping the corners of the room like a hawk.

Merenda’s expression shifted by degrees, subtle as glass cracking under frost. One eyebrow rose the smallest fraction, a flicker of skepticism alive in her eyes. “A review?” she repeated, the word careful, like she was tasting it for truth. Her gaze sharpened, lingering on Sheila’s easy grin. “And for which magazine do you write? I confess, we’ve not had the pleasure of hosting many journalists in Hexspire lately.” She let the question hang, her tone polite but lined with scrutiny.

“Oh, an independent publication,” Sheila said smoothly, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. “We highlight unique places, new ventures—especially ones with stories behind them. And I’ve been hearing that this hotel has something special, with Tobias Ford as its manager. Quite the reputation, from what I gather.” Her eyes flicked sidelong toward Syloki, quick as a wink, as if to say *see? I’ve got this*.

At the mention of Tobias, Merenda’s tone adjusted, a subtle shift in rhythm like a note struck differently in the middle of a song. “Ah. Tobias.” The name carried a faint warmth, though her eyes never softened. “He is very dedicated. This hotel is more than just a business to him—it is a project of loyalty. But I must ask,” she leaned forward ever so slightly, her gaze holding Sheila’s like a pin through paper, “what exactly draws your interest in him? Managers do not often warrant attention in reviews.”

Syloki said nothing, her face a careful mask of mild disinterest, but her eyes roamed again. Across the counter, the brass bell was dulled, smudged with fingerprints. In the corner of the adjoining room, through a wide doorway that opened into a sitting area, she caught sight of a man slumped on a sofa, mouth slack, chest rising and falling in a deep sleep. His boots were still on, mud crusted along the soles, and one arm dangled to the floor with a half-empty glass just out of reach. A snore rattled faintly in his throat. For all the polished airs Merenda tried to put on, the scene reeked of disappointment, even for a place calling itself modest. Syloki’s lips twitched faintly as she thought, *Two stars was generous.*

Sheila, ever persistent, leaned in closer against the desk, her voice softening into that careful, conspiratorial hum she liked to use when trying to pry something loose. “You know, I’m impressed Tobias would even try setting up here. Hexspire isn’t exactly the safest, is it? Between the stray drunks, the cutpurses, and the occasional brawl, well—it seems a risky choice for a new business.” She smiled, all teeth and sweetness, though her eyes flickered with pointed curiosity. “One would think it takes a certain kind of backing to keep a place like this steady.” Her words danced right up to the line, skirting the edge of accusation without ever stepping across.

Merenda’s jaw tightened, just slightly, enough for Syloki to catch. “Every district has its shadows,” the receptionist replied, her tone clipped, almost rehearsed. “We pride ourselves on discretion. Guests come here because they know their safety is assured, their comfort preserved. Whatever trouble prowls outside these doors stays where it belongs—outside.” She smoothed her hand across the polished desk, a gesture as precise as her words, as if trying to wipe away the conversation itself.

Sheila pushed gently again, tilting her head, voice laced with false innocence. “Of course, of course, but I’ve heard whispers about… well, certain groups that keep Hexspire under their thumb. If not one faction, then another. Seems impossible to open something so public without making… friends.” Her tone dipped into a sly smile, as if she were speaking about a social dance rather than criminal allegiances. Syloki, however, watched the flicker in Merenda’s eyes, the way her lips tightened before parting, the faintest signal that she had heard this line of inquiry before—and did not like it.

Merenda’s expression was flawless, but Syloki’s instincts prickled. Something in the receptionist’s stillness, in the way her gaze darted and returned, told her she was bracing for something more than idle curiosity. The hairs on Syloki’s neck rose, a whisper in her gut telling her not to let this slide. So she ignored the careful script Sheila was weaving and cut straight to the point, her voice calm, almost casual, but her words deliberate. “What about the Crows?” Syloki asked, her gaze fixing on Merenda with a steadiness that felt like a blade unsheathed. “Aren’t they dangerous in this area?”

The silence that followed was sharp enough to snap. Even Sheila's head swiveled, her eyes wide, her lips parted in surprise. "Sy—" she started, but the rest of her words caught in her throat. Merenda, however, had frozen mid-motion, her arms folding across her chest, her sharp frame tightening like a bow drawn to its full length. Her eyes narrowed, suspicion flashing bright before she spoke, each syllable edged with steel. "Interesting story you're weaving," she said coldly. "But your inquiries about Tobias are raising my suspicions. I'll need to inform my supervisor."

She half-turned, her hand already shifting toward the small bell that sat on the counter, its brass catching the dim lantern light. Before she could strike it, Syloki leaned forward, her voice low and deliberate, each word measured. "You might not need to. I know a man named Arthur Xavier. Good friend of mine." She let the name hang in the air like smoke, heavy and undeniable. "He works closely with the Cyphers. Thought you'd want to know."

The reaction was immediate, subtle yet unmistakable—the faintest flicker in Merenda's gaze, a stilling of her fingers above the bell. The name had landed, though whether it was the weight of Arthur, the shadow of the Cyphers, or both, Syloki couldn't yet tell. She met that flicker with her own steady stare, refusing to blink first. And then the room held itself in that breathless pause, a cliff's edge moment where everything might tip one way or the other.

Sheila leaned over to whisper to Syloki. "Where are you going with this, Sy?" she murmured, eyes flicking toward the reception desk as if the wood itself might be listening. Syloki whispered back in rushed tones, "Just following my intuition here..." and the words slid out thinner than she wanted, the truth wrapped in a shrug. Before she could say more, Merenda's hand rose in a slow, practised arc—an almost imperceptible command—and the hotel seemed to acknowledge it, shutters of attention shifting deeper within the rooms. For a heartbeat the hush of the place tightened, the little lantern by the door guttering like a throat clearing, and then a figure moved out from the corridor with the quiet authority of someone who made silence work for them. The air smelled faintly of lemon oil and old varnish, and Syloki felt the hairs along her forearm prick, that small skin-warning the manor had taught her to heed. Everything about the gesture said this was no longer idle curiosity; whatever game they'd come to play, the board had been noticed.

Moments later, Elira Nox entered—tall, compact, every inch of her a blade set in velvet. She carried herself like someone who had been trained to be still and lethal in the same breath; the corridor seemed to clear around her in respect or fear, and her presence made the room feel smaller because it filled it with purpose. "Merenda, what seems to be the issue?" Elira asked, her voice smooth yet piercing, the kind that measured people and found the weak points without raising a hand. Merenda explained, voice clipped but efficient. "Miss Nox, these two are asking about Tobias Ford. They seem overly interested in his connections." Elira's eyes found Syloki with the kind of glance that reads pockets and lies; the stare wasn't rude so much as surgical. "What is your interest in Tobias Ford?" she asked, and the simple question landed like a weight between Syloki's ribs.

Syloki straightened her spine just enough to look like a woman who belonged to the world she prowled. "I'm looking to discuss some affiliations," she replied, voice steady even though her pulse had kicked up a notch; she set her words out carefully, like coins on a table. "I'm friends with Arthur Xavier, and I've heard that Tobias works closely with the Crows. It would be beneficial to understand those relationships." The name Arthur hung in the air, and Syloki watched Elira's expression tighten, subtle as a pinprick—curiosity spiked with calculation. Elira's brow furrowed, the faint movement of someone cataloguing evidence. "Arthur Xavier is not a name we take lightly. What do you expect to gain from this conversation?" she asked, and though the words were measured, every syllable carried a challenge: prove yourself or leave.

Syloki leaned forward another half-breath, the kind of motion that says you mean what you say and you won't stumble from it. "I assure you, my intentions are sincere," she answered, forcing warmth into the line so it sounded like honesty instead of a charm; "I simply want to ensure there are no misunderstandings. My friend Arthur has mentioned the importance of these connections in navigating Doskvol's complexities." Elira let the silence sit on the table a long second, weighing the truth against the lies she could smell in the room; then she exhaled, small and controlled. "Your approach is audacious, and I respect that. However, you must understand that the Crows have their own agenda. Why should I trust that you won't tip the scales?" Sheila, never one to be outshone by an interrogation, piped up with the bright, practiced tone of someone selling a story. "Miss Nox, I'm here as a hotel reviewer. We're not looking to cause trouble—just gather information and write an honest piece about a promising hotel. If anything, we'd like to highlight the potential of your establishment."

Elira studied them both as if they were objects she might need to move aside or keep close; the room felt like a scale being balanced with minute breaths. At last she nodded, slow and precise. "Very well. You seem earnest, but I need to ensure there's no foul play involved. I'll fetch Tobias for you, but know this: if I sense any deceit, I won't hesitate to remove you from this hotel." Her words were not a threat so much as an axiom of the house—her duty, her law. Syloki felt the small, stubborn flare of relief at the agreement, but kept it small and tucked; there was too much still unknown, and Merenda's posture had shifted back into that careful reserve that said she had already sent a message deeper into the hotel. The sleeping man in the corner of the next room shifted and murmured in his nap as if the tension had reached him too, and Syloki's nose wrinkled at the stale smell of his cloak mingled with cheap soap. Sheila reached out and gave Syloki's sleeve a quick squeeze, conspiratorial and steady, and Syloki nodded once—ready, for now, to play the part the hotel wanted, while keeping her ears and eyes pried open for anything Tobias's voice might not want them to hear.

Elira's boots clicked softly against the polished floor as she turned and disappeared into the corridor, her shadow trailing like a second escort. The silence she left behind felt heavier than before, like the lobby itself was holding its breath until she returned. Syloki leaned closer to Sheila, her voice a whisper but quick, rushed with the tension still needling under her skin. "That could've gone worse, I guess. Though I swear she was one blink away from throwing us out by the scruffs." Her hand tapped nervously against her thigh, a staccato rhythm that betrayed the adrenaline starting to coil through her veins. Sheila tilted her head, flashing that same irrepressible grin she always did when danger brushed too close. "Relax, Sy. We're still standing. And we're about to meet Tobias himself. That's not a bad outcome at all." Syloki chewed the inside of her cheek, muttering, "Unless it turns into one."

Sheila, ever the anchor in stormy waters, turned her attention back to Merenda, who still stood tall behind the desk, her composure unflinching but her arms crossed a little tighter. "So, tell me," Sheila began, softening her voice into something warmer, "what's been the hardest part about opening a place like this? New hotels don't exactly bloom every day in this city." Merenda's lips pursed in the faintest twitch of irritation, though her words came out steady, deliberate. "It's less about the building and more about the neighborhood. Hexspire has its… history. And the wrong kind of attention can ruin a reputation before it's even formed." She gave Sheila a glance sharp enough to remind her that every word was weighed before leaving her mouth. "We do our best to keep things quiet, respectable. That's the goal."

"Sounds like a balancing act," Sheila replied, nodding with sympathy that might have been genuine, might have been play. "Keeping the doors open for guests while keeping the shadows out. I can imagine how exhausting that must be." Merenda gave a faint, humorless chuckle. "Exhausting, yes. But necessary. People want comfort. Discretion. Safety. All of that has to be cultivated carefully. And if you don't mind me saying—asking too many questions is rarely part

of that balance." Her eyes flicked toward Syloki as she said it, as if she hadn't forgotten the earlier blunt mention of the Crows.

Syloki felt the weight of that gaze, and the nerves beneath her ribs twitched into words before she could stop them. "Right, well, comfort's one thing, but safety's another, isn't it? What happens when safety depends on the kind of company you keep, huh?" She fiddled with the sleeve of her coat, words spilling faster now. "I mean, you can line the walls with flowers, serve the best tea in the city, but if someone comes knocking who doesn't care about any of that, it all falls apart like a card tower. Doesn't it? Not that I'm saying that's what you're doing, but—well, maybe it is, I don't know, I'm just talking here." Her voice cracked with a nervous laugh, and Sheila reached out to give her wrist a squeeze under the table, a silent plea to slow down.

Merenda's eyes narrowed slightly, though she didn't cut in, her silence sharper than any interruption. Sheila cleared her throat quickly, sliding back into her role as the smooth one. "What Sy means is, you must have to be very careful about who you trust, especially in this district. It's not easy to run something so visible without attracting attention." That earned a slight nod from Merenda, but no more. Syloki swallowed down the rest of her churning thoughts, chewing the inside of her lip raw while her leg bounced under the table. The quiet of the lobby pressed down heavier, like the hotel itself wanted to know what she'd say next.

And then, just as the silence felt like it might stretch too long, Syloki's gaze shifted toward the door. The lantern outside flickered against the glass, casting a jagged glow over a woman stepping into the lobby. Her gait was wrong—too stiff, like a puppet dragged by strings. Her eyes unfocused, her face slack in a way that made Syloki's stomach knot instantly. The hairs rose on her arms as the woman drifted toward the reception desk, every step unsteady, like her body hadn't been invited to the walk. Syloki felt her breath hitch, whispering under it, "Blue-Eyes… something's off."

The words came soft at first, almost harmless in their sing-song cadence, but the more the woman repeated them, the more they clung to the walls of the lobby like a curse. "Late, late, says the white rabbit." Her voice did not rise or fall, just the same low, even tone, delivered with the dead precision of a metronome. Syloki felt the hairs along the back of her neck bristle, and when she glanced sideways, she caught Sheila's lips press into a thin line, her cheerfulness waning into quiet unease. Merenda, standing tall behind the desk, folded her hands in front of her, masking her concern with the well-trained poise of someone who had dealt with countless difficult guests before. "Excuse me," she said firmly, though her voice held a strain it hadn't moments earlier. "Your name, please. Do you intend to rent a room with us tonight?" Her words slid into the air like a net, meant to catch clarity where none existed, but the woman only tilted her head and answered with the same chant: "Late, late, says the white rabbit." Her eyes never once focused, as though the question hadn't even landed.

Merenda tried again, leaning forward slightly, her brow drawing together with controlled patience. "Miss, you need to explain yourself. What brings you here? Do you need help?" She spoke carefully, her tone adjusting as if she were coaxing a frightened animal, but the woman only kept on, lips stiff, voice like a clock ticking past midnight. "Late, late, says the white rabbit." The sound scratched at Syloki's nerves, an echo that felt too deliberate, too heavy with intent. She shifted on her feet, her boots squeaking against the wood, her fingers twitching toward her coat pocket where she kept her flask of holy water. Sheila leaned closer, whispering just loud enough for Syloki to catch: "I think she might be in distress, Sy… something's not right." Syloki's throat was tight, but she nodded anyway, her instincts burning like a warning bell.

The door opened again with a soft creak that shouldn't have made her heart lurch, but it did. Two men entered, their bodies rigid, their movements stilted and unnatural in the same way as the woman's. Their eyes were blank, unmoored from the present, their jaws working as though

chewing invisible words. The lobby's faint warmth seemed to drain with their arrival, replaced by a tension so sharp Syloki could almost hear it in her ears. Sheila's hand brushed her sleeve, a quick touch, grounding her, but the pit in her stomach only deepened. "Something's wrong," Syloki whispered, voice caught between her teeth, her eyes darting between the three figures now standing too close, too quiet.

Merenda, unshaken at first, squared her shoulders, her professional mask cracking only in the lines tightening at her eyes. "Listen," she said firmly, her voice edged now with warning. "If you want to stay here, you'll need to provide identification. I don't care if this is a joke or a stunt—you don't walk around my lobby without telling me who you are. Do you understand me?" Her hand had slid under the desk, perhaps reaching for a bell or a weapon, Syloki couldn't tell, but it was too late. The woman's body snapped forward in a blur of motion that felt all wrong, her fingers clawing down over Merenda's wrist and pinning it to the counter with terrifying force.

The glint of steel appeared in her other hand, flashing under the lantern's glow. A knife—small, jagged, sharp enough that Syloki's heart nearly seized in her chest. The woman's voice broke from its monotone, shattering into a scream that rattled the walls. "Late, late!" The sound pierced the air, unholy in its fervor, echoing with something beyond reason. Merenda's calm broke at last, her voice sharp as the blade itself as she cried, "Get back!" She twisted, struggling to pull free, but the knife was already arcing dangerously close to her ribs.

Sheila's body moved before her mind seemed to catch up—bright, wild, and brave. "No! Let her go!" she cried, lunging forward with all the desperate force she had. Her hands gripped the woman's wrist, wrestling with strength that didn't match the frail frame she was clutching. The knife's edge skimmed so close to Sheila's arm that Syloki's breath locked in her throat. "Stop her!" one of the men bellowed suddenly, his voice coarse and feral, and then he too was moving, charging forward with eyes wide and a grotesque expression twisting his face.

The lobby collapsed into chaos. Chairs scraped and toppled, the lantern swung on its chain, shadows jerking violently across the walls as the man hurled himself toward Merenda. "Run!" Syloki shouted without thinking, her body already in motion, darting toward him with her heart hammering. But he hit her shoulder like a stone wall, shoving her aside with force that knocked her off balance. She stumbled, boots sliding across the floorboards, but her instincts flared, pulling her upright in an instant, adrenaline flooding every nerve. Sheila's voice tore across the room, raw and urgent as she struggled against the woman's grip. "Get off her!" The knife gleamed between them, slicing too close, every movement a heartbeat from blood. Syloki steadied herself, her pulse roaring in her ears. This wasn't some odd guest anymore—this was something else. Something wrong. And it was only just beginning.

The man's fist cut through the air like a hammer, and Syloki's gut clenched when she saw it swinging toward Sheila's face. "Not today!" she shouted, her body moving on instinct, hurling herself at him from the side. Her shoulder slammed into his ribs with enough force to drive them both into the ground, the boards rattling beneath their weight. The air shot from her lungs on impact, a gasp torn from her throat, but she clawed at him anyway, her nails digging through the fabric of his coat as she tried to pin him. His sweat-slick skin stank of copper and rot, the kind of smell that lingered in prison corridors, and it made her stomach twist. "Stay still, damn you!" she hissed, her teeth gritted as she fought against his thrashing limbs. From behind her came Sheila's strained voice, panicked but strong: "Sy, hurry—she's got me!" Syloki turned just enough to see the knife gleaming dangerously close to Sheila's throat, the woman's grip unyielding as she chanted, "Late, late! Too late!"

Merenda's voice cracked like a whip, sharp and commanding despite the fear rising in her tone. "Elira! We need help, now!" The cry carried through the halls, but no answer came yet, only the chaos of their fight. The man beneath Syloki bucked his hips and slammed an elbow into her

jaw with a crunch that exploded white pain across her skull. Her vision flashed, her head whipped to the side, and she tumbled back off him, staggering as she fought to stay on her feet. “Fuck—” she spat blood from the corner of her mouth, shaking her head. Her knee throbbed with each movement, her old wound screaming, but she forced her body forward again. “You think that’ll stop me? I’ve had worse mornings,” she muttered through clenched teeth, her nervous voice twitching up at the edges even as her heart battered against her ribs. She planted her heel into his stomach, the kick landing with a thud that drove air from his lungs, but his hand lashed out in retaliation, twisting her arm in a cruel wrench that sent fire lancing up to her shoulder.

The knife clattered to the floor as Sheila struck the woman’s wrist with a sudden surge of defiance, the steel ringing sharp against the boards. “Yes! That’s it, Blue-eyes!” Syloki cried out, her voice breaking in relief, trying to feed strength into her friend. Sheila shoved, trying to wrest free, but the woman’s face twisted, fury distorting her blank monotone mask into something raw and feral. Her fist lashed across Sheila’s face, the crack of impact echoing in the lobby as Sheila’s body hit the ground hard. “No!” Syloki’s scream tore from her throat, ragged and wild, her eyes burning. Sheila lay still, her blonde hair spilling across the wood, blood welling at her lip. “Bitch!” Syloki shrieked, rage slamming into her chest like fire, cutting through the fog of pain. “You’re gonna regret that!” Her boots pounded the floor as she hurled herself forward, slamming into the man’s waist, her hands clawing to rip him off Sheila’s limp body.

But he was heavy, solid as a boulder, his grip on Sheila unyielding. He twisted, dragging Syloki like she weighed nothing, and shoved her backward again. Her back hit the wall, the impact rattling her teeth, but she clawed her way upright, breath ragged, eyes glassy with tears she didn’t notice. “You don’t get to win here, not today!” she snarled, the nervous chatter in her voice snapping sharp, words spilling between panting gasps. “I’ll tear your fucking eyes out if I have to—” Her threat broke as she lunged again, fists slamming into his side, nails tearing at his coat, desperate to break his hold.

The woman, now free of Sheila’s resistance, came at her too, her shriek clawing at Syloki’s ears. “Too late! Too late!” she screamed, her voice cracking into hysteria as her hands swung down like talons. Syloki ducked, feeling the rush of air where the strike missed her head by inches, and brought her knee up into the woman’s gut, the impact jarring them both. “Stay down!” Syloki spat, her voice trembling but fueled by raw fury, her chest heaving. But the woman only laughed, a high-pitched, broken sound that made Syloki’s skin crawl. The man seized her by the arm again, twisting it back until her bones popped in protest. Pain seared through her, ripping a cry from her lungs, but she slammed her forehead forward, skull cracking against his nose in a spray of blood. He roared, stumbling back, his grip loosening.

Her body ached, her leg screamed, her jaw throbbed, but Syloki’s adrenaline burned hotter, drowning it all out. She wiped blood from her mouth with the back of her sleeve, her wide eyes flicking between the man and woman circling her now. Sheila lay slumped against the wall, unconscious, and Merenda stood behind the desk, her face tight with fury, searching desperately for something, anything, to strike with. “Come on, then,” Syloki panted, her voice broken but defiant, trembling with both nerves and determination. “Let’s see if you’re still chanting when I split your teeth on the floor.”

The lobby had descended into pure chaos, every second punctuated by the guttural grunts of exertion and the sickening thud of fists meeting flesh. Merenda, breaking from her receptionist’s poise, vaulted over the desk with a surprising burst of strength, her arms locking around the woman’s shoulders as she dragged her back from Syloki with a guttural shout. Elira appeared from nowhere, her presence like a storm—silent, sudden, and overwhelming. She moved with precise, brutal efficiency, her fists landing with surgical force as she drove the man backward, her eyes cold and focused like sharpened steel. Syloki staggered upright again, blood still slick

on her chin, and couldn't help but notice it—their enemies didn't flinch, didn't guard themselves, didn't care about pain. They were fighting like puppets, bodies moving on strings, as if their own lives were meaningless. "They're not scared to bleed," she muttered between gasps, her voice trembling with adrenaline, "this isn't natural—someone's pulling their strings." Her words barely cut through the din, but Elira's brow twitched as if she had heard and understood.

The clash filled the hotel with a violent rhythm—crashing bodies, overturned chairs, the hollow crack of knuckles on bone. Merenda's face was slick with sweat as she fought to pin the knife-wielding woman, who thrashed with inhuman ferocity, her shrieks of "Late, late!" echoing in broken rhythm. Elira drove the man toward the corner, each strike deliberate, her movements those of a soldier who had done this countless times before. Syloki stumbled in, half limp from the pain in her leg, but still lashed out with wild kicks and scratches, her voice a frantic hiss. "Stay down, damn you—just stay down!" she spat, though her hands trembled each time she struck. Her heart hammered in her chest, and for a moment, she thought they might be swallowed whole by this relentless madness.

Then it came—the crack of a gunshot, loud and final, slicing through the chaos like a blade. Everyone froze, their movements suspended in shock. Tobias Ford stood in the doorway, his figure framed by the lantern light spilling in from outside, his pistol still raised. His face was pale, tight with fury and disbelief, his brown eyes wide as they swept across the room. "What the hell is going on?" he barked, his voice carrying the authority of a man who had once stared death in the eye and lived to talk about it. Without hesitation, he squeezed the trigger again. The woman screamed as the bullet tore through her leg, her chant breaking into a guttural wail as she crumpled to the floor, blood pooling beneath her dress. The sharp smell of gunpowder stung Syloki's nose, grounding her in the moment.

The woman's collapse distracted the man just long enough for Merenda to slam into him, her body crashing against his with a force that sent them both sprawling. "Stay down!" she snarled, her arms locking around his throat as she pinned him, teeth bared with grim determination. The man struggled, clawing and growling like a beast, but Elira was already there, her boot planting firmly on his wrist until the fight was drained from his limbs. The woman still writhed on the ground, her hands clawing at the air as she screamed nonsense, but Tobias strode forward, gun still raised. "Enough," he said coldly, and with one swift strike of the butt of his pistol against her temple, silence finally fell.

Syloki sagged against the reception desk, her chest heaving, every breath tasting like iron. Her hands shook as she wiped at her face, smearing blood and sweat together until her vision cleared. The world rang faintly from the gunshot, the chaos now muted into a hollow silence that pressed in around them. "Is everyone alright?" she gasped, her eyes darting to Sheila's limp body slumped on the floor. Panic surged in her chest, and she forced her legs to move, dropping to her knees beside her friend. "Blue-eyes, c'mon, wake up," she whispered frantically, her hands hovering helplessly over Sheila's face as if afraid to touch her. She pressed her fingers against Sheila's pulse, relief flooding her when she felt it faint but steady. "She's breathing," Syloki announced quickly, though her own voice was shaking.

Tobias lowered his weapon slowly, his face still carved with tension, scanning the broken lobby as if expecting more shadows to burst through the walls. "We're fine," he answered, though the set of his jaw betrayed how far from fine this had been. His gaze flicked to the bodies on the floor, then to his staff, a storm of questions behind his eyes. Merenda, holding the man pinned, let out a breathless laugh that was half hysteria. "Nice shot, Tobias," she said, her voice steadier than her trembling hands. "But what the hell did we just get caught in?" Tobias glanced at her, his tone flat and grim. "Something far more dangerous than we expected. We need to secure this place and find out who these people are." His words filled the silence, heavy with unspoken dread.

Syloki glanced up at him from the floor, her cheek pressed against Sheila's hair, her body still trembling from the fight. Her lips twitched into a weak, crooked grin, her voice hoarse but sharp as she raised her hand just enough to catch his attention. "Tobias, I'm Syloki," she said, her nervous tone slipping back through exhaustion. "I'd say it was a pleasure to meet you, but my friend here needs help."

Syloki barely felt her knees bruise as she crouched on the floor, her arms folded protectively around Sheila's limp form. Her hands trembled as she fumbled with the flask at her belt, uncorking it with her teeth and splashing a few drops of water on her friend's brow. "Blue-eyes, come on, don't you dare do this to me," she whispered, her voice cracking, every syllable thick with fear. Sheila stirred faintly, a groan slipping from her lips, but her eyes stayed closed, lashes trembling against her skin. Relief swelled sharp and painful in Syloki's chest, making her throat ache as she brushed the damp hair back from Sheila's face, whispering again and again, "You're alright, you're alright, I've got you." Around her, the world continued to move, but all she could focus on was the fragile rise and fall of Sheila's chest, each breath an anchor keeping her from collapsing entirely.

Behind her, Elira was already in motion, her voice clipped and brisk as she barked instructions, the weight of command settling naturally on her shoulders. She knelt beside the unconscious attackers, her broad hands moving with methodical precision as she bound their wrists and ankles with lengths of cord she seemed to conjure from nowhere. Her movements carried no hesitation, no wasted effort—each knot tied tight enough to cut off circulation, each loop cinched until escape was impossible. "They won't stop," she muttered darkly, pressing her knee into the back of one man's spine to keep him pinned. "Even half-dead, they'll claw their way forward. This isn't instinct, this isn't rage. They've been hollowed out, strung up like puppets. Classic mind control." Her words carried a quiet certainty, the tone of someone who had seen it before. Syloki's ears burned at the phrase, though she didn't lift her head, her stomach clenching with recognition.

Merenda stood a few steps away, her clothes disheveled, her usually pristine composure cracked, though her voice came out sharp as ever. She crossed her arms tightly, her long fingers digging into her sleeves as she spoke. "This was too clean, too focused. They weren't here to kill us, not really. They came to make a scene, to make a point. A warning." Her gaze flicked briefly toward Tobias, then to Elira, before settling back on the still bodies of the attackers. "And it worked. Whoever sent them knew exactly what they were doing—showing us they can reach us whenever they want. That we aren't untouchable, no matter how strong our walls are." Her words rang out bitter, and for the first time, Syloki caught a strain of fear in her voice.

Tobias holstered his pistol with a weary motion, his jaw clenched so tight it looked carved from stone. He crouched by the reception desk, rubbing his forehead with one hand, his eyes narrowing as he surveyed the aftermath. "Enough. No more underestimating them. We can't let our guard down again. We need tighter watch, better precautions." His tone was even, but his voice carried a weight that silenced both women momentarily. "This isn't going to be the last time. I'll bring in more muscle, men and women I can trust. We'll double shifts, triple if we need to. If they're bold enough to strike on opening day, then we can expect worse after the breakout." At the word, the air seemed to sharpen, the weight of it lingering like smoke. Neither Elira nor Merenda corrected him, nor did they ask which breakout he meant. It was clear. The escape from Ironscar still hung over every corner of Doskvol like a shadow.

Syloki pressed her forehead to Sheila's shoulder, her pulse hammering as the fragments fell into place like broken glass cutting her palms. Mind control. Puppets on strings. That was Merrow's signature, wasn't it? The Painted Widow had been forced into her final performance under his laughter, her will twisted until it cracked. And now here it was again, alive in these strangers,

their bodies twisted into weapons that cared nothing for blood or bone. The Gloam Sisters had warned her of his shadow, but hearing it from Tobias and his people confirmed what she had feared in the marrow of her bones—Merrow was not just alive, he was active. And the breakout… of course. He had his people again, his most devoted monsters set loose into the streets, the foundation of his old terror sewn back together.

Her throat tightened as she thought of the timing. Why here, why today, why the Crows? The Painted Widow's screams echoed in her skull, "You stood in the wings while he burned us." Was Merrow sending a message, not just to them, but to her? The idea gnawed at her, bile rising sharp in her throat. She gripped Sheila's hand tighter, whispering low so no one else could hear, "You're not taking her. Not her. Not again." Her eyes flicked up at Tobias, Elira, and Merenda, their conversation still turning over strategy and vigilance, but Syloki's mind had already leapt ahead, dark and frantic. Merrow was moving, pulling strings, setting fire to the city one stage at a time. And for reasons she couldn't yet fathom, the curtain had risen first on the Crows.

Chapter 06: **The Rabbit's Path**

The air in the meeting room was as thick as the velvet curtains that sealed it from the drafty halls beyond, heavy with the scent of old wax and ink, and the low burn of oil lamps along the paneled walls. The long table, carved from some dark, nameless wood, was already cluttered with open ledgers, scraps of parchment covered in rushed handwriting, and an empty glass goblet tipped on its side where someone had lost patience earlier. It was one of the two meeting rooms Lira kept for matters of record and reflection, and though protocol demanded debriefings after every outing, this gathering felt different. The number of figures in the room was higher than usual, and that in itself pressed an odd tension against Syloki's ribs. Lira sat at the head like a storm contained in bone and skin, Pamela leaned back in her chair with her usual feline poise, Sheila was at Syloki's side fiddling nervously with a quill, and opposite them were Mary, Tabatha, and Joane—three Sisters rarely gathered in the same place, their black dresses and pinched expressions echoing each other like a triad of ravens.

Syloki sat slumped a little lower than she should have, her body stiff and raw, exhaustion hanging off her shoulders like a damp cloak. She knew she was bleeding somewhere—her ribs burned with each breath, her side throbbed where a bruise was deepening unseen—but protocol left no room for frailty. Reports came first, always, even if you had to bite the inside of your cheek to stay upright. She kept her diary closed on her lap, her fingers brushing the leather absentmindedly, trying to keep herself tethered as her mind slipped back to flashes of steel and chanting voices. Sheila's voice carried most of the load for now, bright as ever even under the weight of retelling.

The recounting went as these things often did: the approach to the hotel, the façade of casual inspection, Merenda's sharp eyes and Elira's sudden authority, then the eruption of violence before answers could be dug free. Lira listened with that cold intensity that made Syloki's skin itch, her chin resting on the back of her interlaced fingers, her eyes cutting to every speaker as though weighing their worth on a blade's edge. Pamela's gaze flicked often to Syloki, perhaps catching the tremors she tried to hide. Mary scribbled in the ledger without looking up once, the scratch of the quill like a metronome keeping pace with the tale.

Sheila leaned forward as she spoke, gesturing animatedly, the glow of her eyes bright under the lamplight, her words bouncing between careful detail and bursts of emotion. "They weren't themselves," she said firmly, shaking her head as though trying to rid herself of the memory. "The way the woman came at Merenda—it wasn't just rage. It was like her body didn't belong to her anymore. Stiff, strong, unyielding, like a puppet on strings. And the men too. They didn't stop, not until…" She glanced toward Syloki briefly, then forced her eyes back to Lira. "Not until we put them down."

The silence that followed was dense, a lead weight pressing down on all of them. Lira's lips curled, not in a smile but in something sharper, thinner, her knuckles whitening as her hands clenched. Pamela shifted but didn't speak. The three Sisters opposite waited, pens and eyes poised. Syloki's stomach twisted, knowing something heavy was about to break.

"And," Sheila continued, her voice suddenly lower, almost unsure now, "the woman… she kept repeating something. Over and over, even when we tried to talk her down. It was all she said." She swallowed, her throat tight, then lifted her gaze to meet Lira's directly. "Late, late, says the White Rabbit."

The laugh that cracked out from one of the younger sisters—Joane, nervous and shrill—was a mistake made in ignorance. It died in her throat almost immediately when Lira's gaze flicked toward her, sharp as a blade drawn under the ribs. The sound of it didn't linger long, but the silence that followed did, dense and suffocating, as though the room itself held its breath. Lira's face had shifted into something primal, the kind of expression that warned of fire before smoke. It was not rage shouted or thrown across the table, but the contained fury of a storm pressing against glass, one tremor away from shattering everything. Syloki felt it in her spine first, a chill crawling under her skin, the subtle drop of the air that made her tea go instantly cold in its mug.

"Late says the White Rabbit," Lira repeated, her voice low, carved from stone, yet shaking with the heat beneath. "Are you certain it was the words? Those exact words?" Her gaze was fixed on Sheila now, a knife's edge of scrutiny. "Did her glance linger? Or—" she stepped forward sharply, hand slamming against the table for emphasis, making the ledgers jump—"did she turn to the inside of her head, leaving the eyes pure white?" The questions came not like inquiry, but like accusations, as though Sheila herself had failed in some test she never knew she was taking.

Sheila flinched under the weight of it, her fingers tightening around the quill until the wood creaked. Her bright tone was gone, replaced by confusion stammering into fear. "I—I didn't pay attention to her eyes during the struggle," she admitted, her voice small. "It all happened so fast. But… yes. Those words. Over and over, those words." The uncertainty in her tone only seemed to feed Lira's fury further, as though doubt itself was an offense.

Lira moved suddenly, pushing her chair back so violently it scraped a raw note against the floorboards. She rose and began pacing the room, the swish of her skirts sharp, each step a strike against the silence. Her lips moved, murmuring quick fragments under her breath, words too jagged to catch but soaked in venom. Anger seemed to radiate off her like a furnace about to burst, making even the air harder to breathe. None of the sisters dared to interrupt. Mary's pen hovered mid-word above the ledger. Tabatha's eyes darted to Pamela for guidance, but Pamela only sat back in her chair, calm as stone, her face unreadable.

Syloki's throat felt dry, her chest tight. She wanted to shrink into her chair, but her instincts screamed that any sudden movement might ignite the spark hanging in the air. It was as though Lira's very fury seeped into her bones, a primal terror that demanded submission. She felt her heart quicken, her palms damp against the cover of her hidden diary. Around her, the others were equally silent, fear making their posture stiff, their eyes fixed on Lira's pacing figure.

Then, without warning, Lira's fury broke. She spun toward the wall and drove her fist forward with a cry that was half rage, half anguish. The impact cracked like thunder, and from the point of contact a bloom of flame exploded outward. Fire rippled across the plaster in jagged lines, scorching the surface black, the heat so sudden Syloki flinched as if it had singed her skin. The flames writhed for a moment, almost alive, then sank back into nothing, leaving the wall seared and smoking, the acrid scent of burnt wood filling the room. The display was short but brutal, a glimpse of the violence Lira's control kept caged—violence that could so easily spill further if her leash on it snapped again.

Lira's muttering gathered itself into a rougher tide, words tumbling out faster until the room could no longer pretend they were just private grief. "The motherfucker. I knew it wouldn't stick. I knew it wouldn't last. I should have killed him while I had the chance. That stupid boy soldier, a captain now for sure. Now they are all free once again. You will not escape me again…" The sentences came out jagged, each one a stone thrown into a pool, sending ripples through the others. Syloki felt the sound as much as heard it — vibration in the floorboards, a low hum behind her teeth — and something cold and small clenched in her gut. Lira's hands were never still; they fluttered at her sides like nervous birds, fingers clutching invisible hems, then

releasing. Her pace never slowed; she walked the length of the meeting room in a circle, a predator tracing scent, and every time she passed the leaden curtains the dim light caught the hard set of her jaw like a knife edge. The other sisters watched her with a mix of reverence and fear, as if any wrong look might turn that muttering into a ledger of accusations aimed at them. Syloki kept her head down, one hand pressed over the place in her coat where the cold smear of old blood hid, feeling unsteady and rooted at once.

No one spoke; silence grew thick and sticky as the burnt smell from the scorched plaster, and in that pocket of quiet Pamela finally cleared her throat, the only small, steady sound for a beat. “Lira, what is the plan here?” Her voice was soft but direct, an anchor thrown into rough water. Lira paused mid-stride, as if the question had been a blade she’d forgotten on the table and only now remembered to pick up. She drew in a breath that sounded like a bell toll in Syloki’s chest — long, resonant, something that made the hairs along her arms lift. For a moment the furious storm inside her folded back like a curtain; she sat with deliberate slowness, folding her hands as though arranging a prayer, and forced a smile that didn’t touch her eyes. The smile was brittle varnish over something raw, a thin mask Lira wore for the room’s sake, and Syloki could see how it cracked at the edges.

“Put the invite for a crucial strike to all Sisters,” Lira said, voice recalibrated to authority, cold and iron-laced now. “Everyone who wants to accompany. Tonight.” Her words landed with administrative finality, as if she were scheduling a rite rather than ordering a hunt. She pointed, not at anyone in particular, but the motion was clear enough: Pamela to coordinate, the others to rally. “Whoever wants to come, talk directly to you Pamela. Gather as many as you can, enough centaurs and other aberrations to burn this fucking city to the ground.” The last line came out as a low cut, barely contained venom, and the room shifted under the weight of it; even the ancient portraits on the wall seemed to lean in. Syloki’s breath hitched — burn the city to the ground — the phrase a hot coal cupped in cold fingers. The image of stitched limbs and animate corpses rose like smoke, and for a terrible second she pictured flames reflected in Lira’s hard eyes, hunger and blame braided together.

There was no argument. The sisters, trained to follow and to fight in the name of their cause, moved with the sort of mechanical obedience Syloki had only ever seen in ritual and in war. Mary set her ledger aside and stood, pen tucked behind her ear like a talisman; Tabatha’s fingers flexed, the light catching the small dark rune scar along the knuckle she always worried over; Joane swallowed, cheeks flushed but resolute, the bravado of youth meeting the hard clock of duty. Pamela, ever the mediator, nodded once, the gesture brisk and practical. She rose and gathered the necessary scrolls, already calculating which wards would be needed, which bindings to prepare for centaur reinforcements and how many tenders for the carcasses. Her calm was a thin tether for the room; without it, Syloki thought, Lira’s temper might have torn everything apart then and there. The air buzzed with a nervous energy that smelled faintly of iron and old incense from the Sisters’ lamps.

Lira stood at last, coat sweeping about her like a shadow in motion, and left the room as abruptly as she had broken it. The click of her boots faded down the corridor and took with it a portion of the suffocating heat in the air; where she had been, the silence returned but felt altered, like a page with a new, sharp crease. Syloki remained on her chair longer than the others, hands folded in her lap, the diary she’d hidden pressed under one knee like a cold stone. Her mind chased the cadence of the words she’d heard — the chant in the hotel lobby, the smashed calm of a staged attack, Lira’s sudden, raw command — and the pieces shifted in a way that felt ominous and inevitable. Tonight, then. The thought bloomed in her, bright and stubborn, and with it a tightening certainty that whatever they chased at the Crimson Chemical Plant would be a confrontation not just of bodies, but of the old theatre Merrow had planted in the bones of the city.

Sheila's voice tugged Syloki out of her circling thoughts, soft but insistent. "Sy, how's your wounds?" Her hand brushed the edge of Syloki's sleeve as if she might peel it back and check herself, worry laced beneath the brightness she always carried. Syloki's mouth quirked into a half-smile that didn't quite meet her eyes. "Hard worse," she muttered, her usual nervous chatter clipped short this time, though her tone carried that strained lilt that made her sound like she was making a joke even while blood might be seeping under her shirt. Sheila leaned closer, brow creased, eyes searching her friend's face for any sign of a lie. The tension in the room still clung to them, like smoke caught in their hair, but Sheila's focus was entirely on her.

Sheila lowered her voice, almost conspiratorial, her excitement leaking through despite the heavy debriefing that had just passed. "We are going to this mission, right? Both of us?" Her words had an eager edge, like she was daring Syloki to contradict her, though her lips curved in that familiar mischievous smile that softened the challenge. Syloki blinked, caught between exhaustion and the weight of that question, her body aching like it might betray her if she stood too fast. She turned her head, studying Sheila carefully, her fingers worrying at the hem of her sleeve as if the right answer might be stitched there. "Oh, Blue-eyes," Syloki murmured, her voice rising and falling like a fragile thread, "you know this is a volunteer call, right? We don't have to go, right?" Her nervous glance flickered toward the door where Lira had left, as though to remind Sheila of the fire still smoldering there.

But Sheila's grin only widened, her energy rising in stark contrast to Syloki's hesitation. "I know, I know," she said quickly, waving one hand as if to brush away the caution, her eyes gleaming with determination. "But Sy! This is an important mission. She is going to attack the Royal Gang. She must know a place. We need to go." The way she spoke was urgent but cloaked in enthusiasm, as though she had been waiting for this exact opportunity, as though the idea of standing on the edge of danger thrilled her rather than cowed her. Her fingers curled around Syloki's wrist in a quick squeeze, grounding and persuasive at once, her grip stronger than her soft tone suggested.

Syloki hesitated, her lips parting but no words coming out immediately, her mind racing faster than her tongue could keep up. Her nerves buzzed, her body aching from exhaustion, her instincts screaming to step back, yet her thoughts twisted with sharper edges. Lira versus Merrow, that's what it might come down to tonight. That collision, if it happened, could throw sparks that lit up every shadow Syloki had been trying to trace. Her head tipped forward, strands of her dark hair falling into her face as she let out a long breath, almost a laugh though it came out thin and shaky. "You've got a way of making a girl feel reckless, you know that?" she whispered, a little smirk bending her mouth though her eyes were tired and wary.

Sheila only beamed, her thumb brushing the back of Syloki's wrist before she let go, her posture straightening like she'd already won the argument. "Reckless is sometimes necessary, Sy," she said softly, with a sparkle that made it sound like something more than bravado. Syloki shook her head, muttering under her breath as though to herself, "This mission sounds important too…" but the words carried the faintest thread of resolve, the reluctant acceptance that she'd be going. Sheila caught it, her expression lighting up, though she didn't push further, satisfied in the way her excitement seemed to eclipse the heaviness pressing down on them both.

The room around them buzzed faintly with the murmurs of the other sisters, plans beginning to shift into motion, Pamela's low voice coordinating the first strands of the strike. But between Sheila's bright insistence and Syloki's reluctant admission, something heavier lingered unsaid — a personal reason each girl carried like a hidden blade. One glimmered with excitement, the other hid beneath tired breath, but both knew tonight was a path they couldn't afford to walk away from.

The night pressed heavy around them, the damp air rolling off the canal leaving beads of moisture on Syloki's hair and coat. Their footsteps had been swallowed by the sodden earth as they crossed the wooded stretch behind Ashmere Hall, and now, crouched at the edge of the trees, the sight of the Crimson Chemical Plant sprawled before them like some iron beast half-dead but still breathing. Its chimneys leaned into the sky, exhaling faint wisps of smoke, and though most of the southern complex lay in ruin — twisted scaffolds and shattered windows left as relics of the accident years ago — the north side still pulsed with a dim, steady glow. It looked quiet, deceptively so, but the tang in the air carried a chemical bite that made Syloki's throat itch and her nerves coil tighter. The plant seemed less a building than a scar on the land, and standing here she understood why the stories clung to it like mold.

Lira stood just ahead of them, her silhouette unmistakable, the faint breeze tugging strands of pale hair across her face as she addressed the gathered sisters. Her voice was low but carried easily, the weight of command behind every word. "This place," she said, gesturing toward the hulking plant, "was a nest once, a playground for Merrow and his filth. They manufactured their poisons here, turned air and liquid into weapons. The terror gas, the clown poison — you'll know them if they touch you. Cinnamon on the tongue means fear itself will come crawling inside your mind. An itch in the nose is acid breathing you alive. If either comes, you leave the room. No second chances." Her words cut through the damp silence like a blade, and even the night creatures in the trees seemed to hush as though listening. Syloki's stomach tightened — she could almost taste cinnamon already, though she knew it was only nerves playing tricks.

Pamela stood beside Lira, her calm a stark contrast to the anger simmering just beneath Lira's composure. She said nothing, simply scanned the plant with those sharp eyes of hers, one hand absently brushing against the bark of the nearest tree as if already coaxing the life inside it to be ready for what was coming. Behind them, the rest of the sisters huddled, murmuring to one another in hushed tones. Mary adjusted the straps of her satchel, Tabatha muttered some protective charms under her breath, and Joane glanced repeatedly at the looming factory, lips pressed tight as though she might bolt if not for Lira's presence holding her there. The tension was palpable, every inhale heavy with anticipation. Syloki shifted her weight from foot to foot, restless, her fingers tapping against her thigh in her nervous rhythm, wishing she could fast-forward to knowing if they'd come back alive.

And then there were the horrors. Five centaurs, grotesque silhouettes in the shadow of the trees, their stitched bodies grotesquely seamless where human torsos melded with horse flesh. Their breath steamed in the cool night air, snorts like smoke through broken throats. They stood unnervingly still, waiting for their handlers' commands, hollow eyes fixed forward. Two hounds padded close, their forms more bone than flesh, ribs showing through patches of leathery hide, yet their steps silent as shadows. Other abominations lurked further back, stitched shapes Syloki chose not to examine too closely, her stomach twisting at the uncanny sway of their movements. It felt less like an army and more like a nightmare parade, a glimpse of what the Gloam Sisters truly wielded when masks of civility were stripped away.

Syloki swallowed hard, her eyes darting to Sheila. Her friend's excitement had dimmed into a more concentrated resolve now, though a spark still lingered behind her features, her hands flexing restlessly at her sides. She caught Syloki's gaze and gave her a small nod, as if to say *we're here, and we'll see it through.* Syloki nodded back, though her chest ached with both fatigue and something sharper — the gnawing awareness that tonight could change everything, that Merrow's shadow was no longer distant but within reach. She forced a grin, her voice dropping low in her familiar chatter, "Hell of a field trip, huh, Blue-eyes? Just missing the packed lunches." Sheila's soft laugh, brief and nervous, was enough to ground her for a moment.

Lira's voice snapped them back, cold and sharp as steel. "Tonight, no hesitation. We find them, we strike. Leave none of them standing if you can help it. Merrow thinks he can crawl back from

the pit — I'll remind him what hell feels like." Her words hung heavy in the air, final and absolute, and the gathered sisters leaned forward as if the weight of them had pushed them closer toward the field. Syloki inhaled deeply, clutching at the small knife hidden in her coat, the only comfort she had among the arsenal of monsters at their side. From their vantage point at the tree line, the plant loomed silent, waiting, as though holding its breath for the violence about to be unleashed upon it.

Lira's voice cut through the damp air, low but sharp, the kind of tone that carried command without need for volume. She called two of the sisters forward, her eyes narrowing as if to slice through the night itself. "Send the familiars. Scope the place. Kill any vermin you find. Trust no rat or mice." Her words hung heavy, final, and immediately the two witches obeyed, each stepping aside with a small, practiced gesture. The hounds that lurked nearby — grotesque, half-skeletal creatures stitched from flesh and shadow — stiffened and then shot forward, paws tearing through the grass in eerie silence. Their bodies moved too smoothly, too fast, like things propelled by will more than muscle, and Syloki had to look away as their black forms melted into the dark, vanishing toward the industrial hulk of the chemical plant. The sisters' eyes glazed faintly as their control settled over the beasts, fingers twitching in sync with each stride of their familiars.

The wait stretched, pressing into Syloki's nerves until her hands couldn't keep still. Around her, the sisters busied themselves with quiet, deliberate motions, the metallic clicks of revolvers being checked, the soft creak of leather straps being adjusted, charms strung tighter around wrists or necks. Magic was strong, but it was never enough on its own — steel and powder were just as vital in the streets of Doskvol. Syloki followed suit, checking the knife she carried, though the familiar fidget in her fingers betrayed her racing thoughts. She glanced up and caught Lira leaning toward Pamela, their voices a murmur but close enough that the night carried pieces of it back. "Anything from the green, Pamela?" Lira asked, her tone tense, expectant. Pamela tilted her head slightly, her hand brushing against a nearby root as though listening through her skin. "Nothing out of the ordinary, Lira. The same usual movement of people. If they did come here, they masked their movements pretty well. Though…" Pamela hesitated for a breath, "there is a strange amount of late workers these past few weeks."

Lira nodded slowly, her jaw tight, eyes never leaving the looming shape of the plant. Her expression was thoughtful, controlled, but the flicker of suspicion in her gaze made Syloki's stomach churn. Pamela's gifts always unsettled her — not because she doubted them, but because she couldn't quite fathom them. Talk to plants? To roots buried deep in soil and vines clinging to stone? Did they whisper back in dry crackles, or in wet tones like sap dripping through bark? Did they carry accents of the ground they grew in, or voices of long-dead gardeners? Syloki caught herself almost laughing at the thought of a lilac with a southern drawl, but the image curdled quickly into unease. These powers weren't jokes. They were the kind of uncanny tools that made the Sisters what they were — terrifying.

The familiars returned in silence, materializing from the night as suddenly as they had left, their paws slick with grime, their mouths open but not panting, tongues dry. The two witches blinked, coming back into themselves, and reported in quick, flat tones. "No patrolling guards. A few late workers scattered across the northern wing. One room illuminated in the south complex." Their voices overlapped slightly, and though both spoke as if reciting facts, the undercurrent of tension was there — the unnatural way both reported the same details like a chorus rehearsed too well.

Lira wasted no time. She drew a line with her hand, dividing the assembled into two groups with a sharp gesture. "Pamela, you take Mary, Joane, Carey. Sweep north. Don't engage unless you have to. I'll take Syloki, Sheila, Tabatha. We move south. If there's light, there's something worth finding." Her tone left no room for debate. Pamela nodded once, her features calm as still water, while the others gave short, clipped affirmatives. Lira's gaze slid over Syloki briefly, sharp

enough to sting, but she said nothing — the look itself was weight enough. Syloki's throat tightened but she forced a nod, her nerves tapping against her ribs like drumsticks.

Then came the centaurs. The creatures shifted forward with heavy steps, their bodies too wrong to be graceful, human torsos stitched into horse flesh with seams that seemed to pulse faintly under the moonlight. As they approached Lira, she raised her hand, her lips moving in low, guttural syllables. One by one, she laid the spell across them, and each time she did, the creature shimmered — and then vanished. The sound of their hooves remained, the faint exhale of breath, but their forms were gone, wiped from sight as though they had been peeled out of reality. The thought of them moving unseen through the night — those stitched abominations creeping soundless in the dark — sent a tremor crawling up Syloki's spine. She swallowed hard, her lips pressed tight to keep her words from spilling. It was horrific, and yet it was the kind of horror she had chosen to stand beside tonight.

The two groups moved as one shadow until the looming bulk of the Crimson Chemicals plant drew closer, its smokestacks stabbing into the night sky like blackened spires. The air smelled faintly metallic, tinged with the sour tang of chemicals that clung to the back of the throat. They slipped from the cover of trees, boots sinking into damp earth as the massive structure grew clearer, broken windows catching the faintest moonlight. Lira raised her hand, a sharp motion, and the two groups peeled apart with silent precision, each taking a different path. Pamela and her sisters melted into the gloom of the northern wing, their figures swallowed by the dark. Lira led the other four south, moving with the effortless grace of someone who had crept through places like this for decades, each footstep laid with care. Syloki stayed close, nerves thrumming but sharp with anticipation, eyes darting everywhere as if the shadows themselves might reach out to grab her.

Once within the rusted gates, they crouched low, weaving between patches of tall grass and the hulking silhouettes of machinery left to rot. Pipes stretched overhead like veins, some leaking slow drips that hissed as they struck the ground. The south side had been marked as deactivated years ago, its halls condemned after accidents and spills, yet as they drew nearer Syloki caught sight of footprints pressed fresh into the dirt, crates shifted against walls, even a lantern burned out recently and left behind in a pile of rubble. She leaned close to Sheila, her whisper sharp with unease. "Supposed to be abandoned, yeah? Doesn't look very dead to me." Sheila just pressed a finger to her lips, and Syloki bit back a nervous laugh that bubbled in her throat.

Lira motioned, two fingers raised, and Tabatha stepped forward with a quiet confidence, rolling her shoulders like someone preparing to dance. Her lips moved in a rhythm too fast for Syloki to follow, syllables twisting over themselves in harsh whispers, and her hands carved shapes into the air. A shiver rippled outward, and then the world itself seemed to bend. Syloki blinked and glanced down at her arms — her skin had grown pale and translucent, her outline smudging like ink under water until she could barely see herself at all. She gasped softly, the sound caught in her throat, then clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle it. "Oh, this is wicked," she whispered, giddy despite the danger, turning her hands over like a child shown a new toy. "Lira, can I keep her? Seriously, best trick I've seen." Lira ignored her chatter, but Sheila smirked, her lips twitching in amusement before she nudged Syloki's shoulder to keep her moving.

With the spell cloaking them, they crept into the grounds, passing beneath a skeletal crane that creaked faintly in the wind. Every rustle of leaves, every distant drip echoed louder in Syloki's ears, as if the invisibility heightened her senses to make up for the loss of her reflection. The south wing loomed before them, its walls mottled with rust and vines, but the signs of life could not be denied — stacked barrels half-hidden beneath tarps, wheel tracks cutting through the dirt, the faint glow of lamplight bleeding out from the cracks of a warehouse door. Lira slowed

them with a raised fist, her eyes narrowing as she took in the building like a predator deciding where to strike first.

They edged closer, breaths shallow, the silence between them taut as a drawn bowstring. The warehouse doors sagged on their hinges but bore the scuff marks of recent use, as if they'd been pulled open and shut too many times in the last few days. Lira tilted her head, eyes flicking toward Tabatha, then Sheila, then Syloki. With precise gestures, she split them into pairs — Tabatha clasped Sheila's arm, tugging her toward the eastern side entrance with a silent nod, while Lira caught Syloki's gaze and tilted her head toward the main room. The understanding was unspoken but immediate: divide, infiltrate, and learn what lurked behind those walls.

Syloki's pulse hammered as she followed Lira, the invisible veil clinging tight to her skin as they pressed against the warehouse's rusted door. She could hear Tabatha and Sheila's footsteps fading the other way, each beat of their boots like a ticking clock in her chest. Lira placed one steady hand against the door, listening, waiting, and then with the faintest push, it creaked open into blackness. Syloki inhaled, tasting the thick, chemical-tainted air, and stepped after her leader into the dark.

Inside the room, the air felt heavier, thick with the tang of old chemicals and rust. Lira pushed the door further in, and Syloki followed, her eyes adjusting slowly to the dim light bleeding from a lone lamp on the table. There, hunched over and trembling, was a man in worn worker's clothes, his back bowed as if the weight of his task was pressing him into the wood. His hands moved frantically, mixing vials, powders, liquids, each color swirling into another until they looked like veins of fire across the tabletop. His voice broke the silence, muttering in a strained, hurried tone. "I'm late… I'm so very late… I must do this, must do it now… too late, too late…" The cadence was wrong, not simply nervous, but driven by something unnatural. Syloki froze mid-step, the words cutting into her. That phrase again. Always late, always the white rabbit. Her stomach twisted, memory pulling her back to the hotel, to the woman with the knife and the glazed eyes. The pattern was no longer coincidence — it was a thread, one she recognized from a children's book she hadn't thought about in years, a story now warped into something rotten.

Lira didn't hesitate. She drifted forward, silent as a knife's edge, her eyes narrowing on the man as he muttered to himself, oblivious to their approach. Without a single word, she snatched a length of rusted pipe from the ground and swung it in a swift, brutal arc. The crack echoed, sharp and final, as the man crumpled, his body folding against the table before slumping to the ground. The glass beakers and vials clattered with him, spilling their contents across the floor. Shimmering fluids spread into one another, bubbling as they met, and a sharp, cloying scent rose into the air. Syloki's nostrils flared. Cinnamon. Sweet, pungent, and utterly wrong.

Her heart leapt into her throat, panic surging like fire in her veins. "Oh no, oh no, Lira—Lira, it's cinnamon, I smell it—shit, that's it, isn't it? That's the gas, right? Right?!" Her words spilled out in a rush, voice climbing higher as fear seized her. She coughed, waving her hand in front of her face as if that could clear the air, already stumbling backward. "It's already here—what do we do? What do I do? Should we run? Should we hold our breath? Do I hold my breath? Oh fuck, I can't, I can't—what if I breathe it in, I already did, I can feel it—" She clutched her chest, her words quick and uncontrollable, every syllable tumbling over the next. "It's in my lungs, isn't it? It's already inside me, oh gods, I'm too late too—Lira, I'm too late—"

Lira turned her head slowly, her expression unnervingly calm, almost serene against the rising chaos. Her lips curved into a smile, not kind but certain, and she inhaled a deep, deliberate breath of the cinnamon air, her chest lifting as though she welcomed it. Her eyes locked on Syloki's, holding her in place with a terrible, cold steadiness. "It's too late now, Syloki," she said,

her voice smooth and unshaken, each word cutting like a blade. “Just enjoy the ride… and remember none of it is real.”

Syloki’s eyes widened, her breath hitching, and the panic inside her broke loose in a flood of half-formed words. “Not real? What do you mean not real? How can it not be real if it feels real—if it smells like this, if it’s burning my nose—oh saints, it’s burning, I can’t stop smelling it, it’s everywhere—it’s inside me—Lira, I don’t—I don’t know if I can—” She gasped, chest tightening, her hands trembling as her voice pitched higher, nerves cracking wide open into sheer desperation. “None of it’s real? Then why does it feel like I’m dying?”

And still, the cinnamon clung thick in the air, wrapping around her like invisible smoke, as her words broke apart into ragged breath and fear.

Syloki’s nervous chatter cut off like a noose tightening around her throat, her breath caught sharp in her chest. Her gaze shifted, pulled by something darker in the corner of the room. A shape, a presence that didn’t belong to the here and now but was carved into her memory like a scar. He was sitting there, legs crossed, posture loose but commanding, his hands steepled in calm arrogance. The grin stretched across his face was unmistakable, the same one she had seen in the Painted Widow’s vision—mocking, cruel, like he owned the very air in the room. Her stomach turned to ice, every nerve inside her screaming recognition. She leaned toward Lira, her whisper torn ragged from her throat. “That’s him, Lira. Merrow. He’s here.”

Lira turned with deliberate slowness, her eyes gliding over the corner without pause, before she pivoted back to Syloki. Her expression was unreadable, faintly puzzled, her voice low and careful. “Do you see him, Syloki?” The question hung in the heavy air, strange and unsettling. Syloki’s pulse hammered as she snapped back, desperation cracking her tone. “Don’t you??” Her hands trembled, pointing toward the shadow that no one else seemed to acknowledge. Lira’s lips curved, not into a smile but into something sharper, almost clinical. “Oh, I see things alright,” she murmured, her eyes never leaving Syloki’s face. “I just learned to ignore them. But tell me—describe to me what you see.” She was studying her, dissecting her, as if Syloki herself was the experiment in this moment.

And there he was. Merrow. The Terror of Doskvol. But worse—he wasn’t alone. Where had the child come from? When had he taken the boy onto his lap? Syloki’s breath hitched hard as the sight slammed into her like a blade to the gut. The child’s hair, the curve of his face—it was impossible. No, this couldn’t be true. She knew that child. Her son. Fournier. The small boy who had no place here, who should have been safe, hidden away from the corruption of this city. He couldn’t be here, sitting on Merrow’s lap, his tiny face blank and confused as Merrow’s hand brushed through his hair. “No,” Syloki whispered, her voice cracking. “No, no, no…”

Her fingers moved before thought could catch them, gun sliding into her palm like it had been waiting for this. She drew it in a blur and aimed straight at Merrow’s grinning face. The world around her narrowed to that single target, that vile figure with her son cradled against him. His voice cut through the silence, low, jagged, cruel. “It’s him, isn’t it, Syloki? Your son, Fournier. Oh, he is cute indeed.” He stroked the child’s hair as if to brand the moment into her skull. Her vision blurred with fury, with terror, with something she couldn’t even name. Her jaw clenched tight, and with a will that rose like fire in her veins, she pulled the trigger.

The shots tore through the air, deafening inside the confined space. One after another, she emptied the gun, the muzzle flashing with each blast. Every bullet aimed for his face, desperate, certain, her hands steady even as her heart broke apart inside her chest. His face exploded in front of her—blood, bone, shadow—but when the smoke cleared, when her eyes found the spot again, the boy was gone. Fournier had vanished. Her grip on the gun faltered, her breath caught

like she'd been punched in the ribs. "No…" she whispered, the word brittle, hollow, all the fight draining out of her at once. "No…"

Then came the laughter. Low, rich, curling around her ears like smoke. She turned, eyes wild, to Lira, who stood there calm, watching her. Her lips were closed, her expression unreadable, though her gaze held a flicker of interest, almost fascination, like she was watching Syloki unravel thread by thread. But the sound—oh gods, the laughter—it wasn't coming from Lira. It wasn't hers. It filled the room, echoing against the walls, crawling under Syloki's skin, the same terrible, mocking laugh that had haunted her visions. Her throat closed, panic seizing her. Without thinking, she spun and ran, bursting through the doorway as if the walls themselves were caving in, her feet pounding against the floor, her heart hammering only one desperate command into her mind: get away.

Syloki bolted down the corridor, boots striking the floor in frantic rhythm, her breath ragged and loud in her ears. The laughter followed her like a phantom, clinging to the walls, curling through the dim, chemical-scented air. It wasn't just sound anymore—it was inside her skull, echoing, scraping against her thoughts. She turned a corner too sharply, her shoulder slamming into the wall before she collided headlong with a man she didn't recognize. His clothes were plain, workmanlike, his face unremarkable, his expression almost calm. She stammered, words tumbling out in a nervous rush. "Oh, I'm—sorry, sorry—I didn't see you, I—" Her voice cracked and fluttered as she tried to right herself, but his hands were already on her arms, steady, holding her in place.

"It's quite alright, my dear," the man said smoothly, his voice quiet but somehow cutting through the chaos. He smiled down at her, a smile too practiced, too still. Then she felt it. Cold steel slipping through fabric, a pressure blossoming deep in her belly that turned instantly into pain. The blade slid ever so gently, almost tenderly, through her clothes and skin as if it had been waiting there for her all along. Syloki's scream ripped out of her, raw and guttural, her body jerking backward. She shoved at him with wild strength, breaking his hold, and the man stumbled aside, his face twisting as if he'd expected her to collapse instead.

A gunshot cracked from behind, sharp and deafening over her ringing ears. Syloki turned just enough to glimpse Sheila, arms extended, her pistol smoking as she fired at the man who had just stabbed her. "Sy! Look out!" Sheila's voice cut through the chaos, a lifeline thrown into the storm. The man darted back, turning the corner with a speed that didn't seem natural, his shadow flickering and vanishing into the dim hall. Syloki's adrenaline roared like a tidal wave, drowning out everything else. Her hand flew to her stomach, hot blood slicking her palm, the pain blooming sharper with every heartbeat.

Sheila's boots pounded closer, her face tight with worry, her gun still raised as she scanned the corner. "Sy, are you okay?" she demanded, but Syloki barely heard her, her world narrowing to the stab wound and the phantoms in her head. Her breathing hitched, shallow and fast, panic clawing up her throat. The laughter was still there, everywhere, pressing against her mind. Her eyes darted to Sheila, and in that moment it hit her like a hammer. What if this wasn't Sheila? What if none of this was real? Her voice came out a trembling, frantic whisper. "You're not real either, are you, Sheila? Get away from me!"

She started to scramble backward, her back hitting the cold wall, her fingers smearing blood across the plaster as she tried to push herself away from the girl she suddenly couldn't trust. Sheila dropped into a crouch in front of her, hands up, her eyes wide and desperate, voice raised to cut through Syloki's panic. "Syloki! It's me. Sheila! Look at me!" Her voice cracked, but she pushed on, urgent. "Grab me. Feel me. If your hands tell you it's real, then it's real. Otherwise it's the terror gas playing with your mind."

Syloki's breath came in fast, uneven bursts, her eyes wide and glassy as she stared at Sheila's outstretched hands. The hallway tilted and swayed around her like a ship caught in a storm, the shadows stretching and twisting, whispers curling around her ears. Her fingers hovered above Sheila's arm, trembling so badly she thought she might drop dead before she could even touch her. The laughter rose again, slithering under her skin, and she squeezed her eyes shut, tears streaking down her cheeks. Her lips moved without sound at first before she finally whispered, broken, "Please… please be real…" and reached out, her blood-slicked hand trembling as it made contact.

The sound of boots pounding against metal grates echoed just a second before three men rounded the corner, their eyes blank and wide, their jaws slack but gnashing with inhuman hunger. They didn't hesitate, didn't pause to consider—they launched themselves at the witches with the efficiency of predators unleashed from a cage. Their fingernails clawed like blades, teeth snapping with a feral strength that had no care for pain or survival. Almost at once, a skittering hiss filled the air, black shapes spilling across the floor as rats swarmed in from unseen cracks, their beady eyes glinting like embers. The horde was unnatural, moving in unison, their tiny claws scraping against stone as they converged on the women with malicious intent.

"Positions!" Lira's voice cracked like a whip through the chaos, sharp and commanding, her fury from before now turned into a weapon as dangerous as any spell. She raised one hand, palm smeared with phosphorus powder, and snapped her fingers—the air ignited into a roaring ball of flame. The *fireball* erupted forward, bursting across the narrow corridor, engUlricing the first of the feral men and scattering rats into sizzling bursts of fur and ash. The acrid smell of burning flesh and hair filled the room, choking the senses, but Lira didn't flinch. "Sheila! Take Syloki outside! Tabatha, hold your ground with me!" Her orders boomed, brooking no hesitation.

Syloki clutched Sheila's hand, her breath stuttering, her legs trembling with the fear still swimming in her veins from the terror gas. She wanted to fight, she wanted to turn back, but the phantom images still gnawed at her thoughts. She forced herself to look at Sheila's face, the grounding warmth in her grip. "I'll follow—I'll follow, just don't let go," she whispered, her voice chattering against her will. Sheila tightened her hold and turned to fire, her pistol cracking shots down the hall as she tried to clear a path. Each bullet punched into the swarming rats or clipped one of the attackers, slowing but never stopping them.

Beside Lira, Tabatha knelt swiftly, drawing runes into the soot on the floor with trembling hands. Her voice rose in a steady chant, sharp syllables biting the air as she pushed her will into the markings. With a sweep of her arm she slammed the last handful of bone dust into the spell, and the *mind seal* snapped into place around them. The enchantment shimmered, a translucent dome of fractured light that wrapped their minds in protective threads. The whispers dulled, the gnawing illusions weakened, the mind-control's grip faltering for just a heartbeat. The men staggered, clutching their heads as if confused, rats squealing in disarray. "Hold it as long as you can!" Lira barked.

Another wave surged in, rats spilling faster, their bodies thick as water flooding a ship's deck. Lira spat into the dirt at her feet, mixing it with her own blood from a bite on her arm, and slammed the mixture into a glyph carved against the wall. "*Symbol of death!*" she roared, and a pulse of black energy tore outward. The wave of necrotic force washed across the swarming vermin, their tiny bodies shriveling and bursting in unison, littering the ground with twitching, smoking husks. The feral men faltered but pressed forward with guttural roars, their strength undiminished by the blast.

"Sheila, now! Outside, before they circle us!" Lira bellowed, another fireball sparking into her hand. Sheila pulled Syloki forward, practically dragging her through the rats, her pistol cracking,

the recoil biting into her arm. Syloki clung on desperately, her breath ragged, every step a battle against the panic still searing through her blood. “Just keep going, Sy! Don’t look back!” Sheila shouted, kicking away a rat that latched onto her boot. Together, they staggered into the open grounds beyond the plant, the night air slapping their faces cold. Behind them, the screams of burning vermin and the roar of magic shook the walls as Lira and Tabatha fought to cover their retreat.

The night exploded into chaos the moment Syloki and Sheila stumbled outside. The open grounds of the Crimson Chemical Plant were already a battlefield, the air thick with smoke, screams, and the acrid stench of burned fur and spilled chemicals. Pamela stood near the broken husk of a storage crate, her arms lifted high, her voice ringing out in sharp, commanding syllables. From the ground itself, thick coils of roots and vines burst upward, writhing like snakes to entangle two of the workers thrashing wildly, their mouths foaming as they shrieked in chorus, “It’s late, it’s too late!” The words were ragged, broken like puppets forced to recite a line, but their frenzy gave them strength as they bit and clawed at the plants.

Beside her, Joane and Mary unleashed volleys of gunfire into the waves of attackers, their faces grim and pale in the flickering torchlight. The workers didn’t stop. Even riddled with bullets, they lurched forward, limbs twitching with unnatural purpose, eyes vacant but full of feral hunger. And through it all came the rats—dozens of them, pouring like a tide across the dirt, darting between boots, climbing legs, throwing the women off balance. Their squeals echoed in maddening unison, as if one will drove them, their speed and size making them nearly impossible to shoot down before they sank their teeth into flesh. Three undead centaurs swung their great makeshift weapons, bones cracking as they smashed swarms into pulp, but for every patch of ground cleared, more rats came racing out of the shadows.

Lira burst from the warehouse door like a fury unleashed, her very presence commanding the night. Her hands blazed with raw flame, and with a snarl she unleashed a *lightning storm* spell that split the sky above, jagged bolts arcing down with deafening cracks, shattering the ground and sending both workers and vermin shrieking into convulsions. The air hummed with the aftershock, her hair whipping around her face as though the storm itself bent to her wrath. Not pausing, she traced symbols into the dirt with her boot and slammed her palm to the ground, casting a *symbol of death* that flared black across the earth. The first worker to charge across it crumpled instantly, screaming as his body stiffened and collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut. Tabatha followed close, whispering fast, frantic chants, throwing shimmering sigils into the air to keep the protective wards active, but even those buckled under the sheer weight of numbers pressing in from every side.

Pamela shouted across the chaos, her face streaked with sweat, her plants lashing wildly, dragging attackers into the mud. “They’re not stopping! They feel no pain!” One of the workers sank his teeth into a centaur’s arm, ripping flesh, only to be smashed into the ground by the beast’s hooves. Syloki stared in horror, her nervous chatter spilling out uncontrollably, “They’re not human, they’re not human anymore, Sy, don’t shoot, no shoot—shoot, gods, shoot!” Sheila fired again, gunshots echoing through the night, picking off rats as they darted in close, one nearly reaching Syloki’s throat before she blasted it away.

Through the madness, Lira’s voice cut sharp as a blade, fury dripping from every syllable. “This is their work! Jonathan Crane, Jervis Tetch, Ottis Flanagan—they’re here! Stop them before they vanish into the dark!” Her command cracked through the pandemonium, and all at once it became clear—this wasn’t random slaughter. It was a diversion, a screen of bodies and vermin to cover the escape of the real threats. She raised her arms again, another arc of lightning splitting the night sky, the crackling thunder booming like cannon fire. “Find them! Don’t let them slip away! I’ll burn this whole fucking plant down if I must!”

The field became a blur of motion—Pamela's roots tearing through earth, Sheila firing wildly at shadows, Tabatha screaming incantations as her wards strained under pressure, the centaurs smashing waves of shrieking vermin. The workers' voices became a hideous chorus, dozens of them crying out as one, "It's late! Too late!" The words carried like a curse, echoing into the night as if mocking the witches. Syloki clutched her gun with shaking hands, her chest heaving, every breath tasting of smoke and blood, her wide eyes darting through the battlefield. Somewhere in the chaos, three men moved unseen, orchestrating the madness—and she knew if they vanished into the night now, Merrow's shadow would only grow darker.

Through the chaos, through the screaming of the rats and the shrill chanting of the mind-broken workers, Syloki's eyes cut through the blur and caught movement—one man, different from the rest, not attacking but fleeing. His shape broke away from the frenzy, cutting into the shadows at the edge of the plant, his movements sharp and purposeful. Her stomach twisted, fear and instinct colliding, and she shouted over the storm, her voice cracking but clear. "Sheila! There is one!" Her finger jabbed forward, pointing through the haze of smoke and madness. Sheila's head snapped to follow her line of sight, her jaw tightening the instant she caught the man slipping into the dark. Under her breath, with a grim set to her tone, she murmured, "Oh no you don't."

Sheila's hands moved quick, practiced, almost ritualistic. From beneath her collar she tugged free a thin silver chain, the small charm glinting with unnatural light as it caught what little glow the fires gave off. Syloki's breath caught in her throat when she recognized it, her nerves buzzing as awe cut through the terror. A portal key. She had seen them before, coveted one even, but she hadn't earned that level of trust from the Sisters yet. They were rare, delicate things, bound to a sliver of arcane trust, and here Sheila was holding one like it was just another piece of her kit. Syloki muttered to herself, her nervous words tumbling fast, "Gods, Blue-Eyes, where'd you—how do you—oh, that's clever, that's so clever."

Sheila pulled a small crossbow free from its holster on her thigh, her motions efficient, unhesitating despite the screams and the lightning ripping the night apart. She worked quickly, her lips moving as she murmured the soft incantation, her voice carrying the quiet rhythm of someone who had practiced this a dozen times before. The charm glowed faintly, and she bound it fast to the tip of her bolt, the energy crawling over the weapon like faint veins of light. Beside her, Syloki's wide eyes followed every step, biting down on her lip, torn between fear for her friend and giddy admiration at the brilliance of it.

The man was almost gone now, slipping into the shadow beyond the walls of the plant, but Sheila lifted her weapon, her blue eyes narrowing into perfect focus. The portal key shimmered at the head of the bolt, humming faintly with restrained magic. Her breath steadied, her finger curled, and with a sharp twang she let it fly. The bolt cut through the cold night, arcing like a streak of fate itself, whistling before it found its mark. A scream tore from the man as it punched into his leg, his run breaking as he stumbled and fell. For one brief instant, he was only a wounded man in the dirt.

Then came the shimmer. A ripple, like water being disturbed, swept over him. His body blurred at the edges, the bolt flashing brightly, and in a sudden puff of displaced air he was gone, the sound of the portal like a crack tearing open the night. The world snapped, and with another shimmer, he reappeared—right in front of them, dragged back into the center of the storm. The look on his face as his momentum betrayed him was pure fury, eyes wild, spit flying from his lips as he bared his teeth.

Syloki gasped, a sharp intake she couldn't suppress, the words spilling out of her like a spark, "Brilliant!" She clutched her gun tighter, her heart pounding so hard she thought her ribs would crack with it. Her admiration was cut short by the man's snarl, his face twisted with rage, his spit

catching the firelight. “Witch!” he spat, the word venom, hate burning in his voice as he squared himself before Sheila, trembling with violent intent.

The man’s hand moved so fast Syloki almost missed it, a flick of his wrist followed by the sharp clatter of metal hitting stone. Two small canisters rolled across the ground, then erupted, belching out thick, swirling clouds that swallowed the battlefield whole. The smoke was dense, choking, filling her lungs in an instant, but it wasn’t the sting that set Syloki’s chest aflame—it was the smell. Cinnamon. Sweet, sharp, unmistakable. Her heart lurched into a wild rhythm, her stomach turning to ice. She knew this. She had only just clawed herself back from the first wave, but the terror was back in full force, stronger, heavier. The world tilted, and in that moment she even forgot the stab wound burning in her side, all of it drowned beneath the flood of fear that ripped through her veins.

And then she heard it—thin, fragile, cutting through the roar of battle like a knife. A baby’s cry. High-pitched, desperate, pleading for someone, anyone, to come. Her eyes snapped forward, the smoke parting just enough for her to see. He was there. A tiny infant crawling along the dirt in the middle of the chaos, tiny hands pressing against the ground as heavy boots pounded all around him. Any second now, someone would step, crush, and his little body would be gone. Syloki’s throat seized, a strangled sound bursting out, and she staggered forward, every part of her burning to reach him. Her legs moved, but then a hand clamped around her arm with iron force.

“Sy…” Sheila’s voice cracked, panic rising in her tone. Her grip was so tight Syloki winced at the pain, her wrist burning from the pressure. Sheila wasn’t even looking at the baby—she was staring into the smoke right before them, eyes wide, seeing something Syloki couldn’t. “Sy, don’t—” she tried, but her words vanished beneath the storm that suddenly exploded into existence overhead. The sky tore open, thunder crashing, and lightning cascaded down in savage bolts, slamming into the earth in rapid succession. The air vibrated, charged, each strike so close it seared white through the smoke. Syloki’s ears rang, her vision blurred, and then she heard it: Lira’s scream. It ripped through the night, raw and furious. “Nooooo!”

Lightning rained like a curtain, striking everywhere at once, splitting the ground, making the earth tremble beneath her boots. Syloki’s gaze darted back to the baby, still crying, still there in the mud, tiny body outlined in flashes of white light. The next strike would hit him—she knew it, felt it in her bones. She twisted, ripping her arm from Sheila’s grasp with a scream of her own. Her feet pounded across the ground, lungs tearing, every ounce of reason drowned by the terror. The storm roared louder, deafening, and there was Lira, her hands lifted high, hair whipping in the wind, her face carved in wrath and grief as she poured power into the storm.

“No!” Syloki cried, her voice raw. Without thinking, without hesitation, she threw herself forward, slamming into Lira with all the force her small body could muster. The impact drove them both down into the dirt, magic sputtering wild as Lira’s concentration broke. The crackle of lightning faltered, sputtered, but Syloki barely noticed—the world was spinning, roaring, the shadows alive all around her. She had to stop her. She had to end it, stop the storm, stop the baby from dying.

Then—pain. A blow from nowhere, sudden and brutal, struck the side of her head. A flash of white lit her skull from the inside, and her body gave out beneath the weight of it. The world collapsed in on itself, sound dropping into a dull, distant hum. Her vision folded into black, and for the first time that night, there was quiet. Peace at last.

Syloki’s eyes fluttered open to the dim golden glow of lanterns and the faint, comforting scent of roses that always clung to the mansion of the Gloam Sisters. The familiar velvet curtains hung heavy over the tall windows, muting the light of Doskvol’s streets beyond. She

shifted slightly and felt the softness of silk sheets beneath her, her head still pounding like a drumbeat buried under layers of fog. Above her, Sheila hovered, her face tight with worry, lips pressed together as if afraid to breathe too loud. The instant Syloki moved, Sheila rushed forward, her hand on Syloki's shoulder to keep her down, eyes bright with both relief and fear. Not a word at first, just the raw look of someone who had been watching too long and was finally allowed to exhale.

Her throat dry, her voice little more than a rasp, Syloki managed to whisper, "What… what happened?" The question felt fragile on her tongue, half-afraid of the answer. Sheila leaned closer, her hair falling over her face, but her voice was steady, if tired. "We lost them," she said simply, but there was no disguising the bitter edge. "They got away. But we survived a pretty brutal fight." Syloki blinked, the words drifting through her mind like smoke, too slow, too heavy. The memories were shards, slipping in and out. She frowned, her lips trembling into a crooked shape as she tried to recall. "Oh my, blue-eyes… last thing I remember… was… me tackling… oh shit." Panic flared sharp across her features as it all came rushing back. The storm. The screams. Lira.

Sheila couldn't help herself—her lips tugged into a smile, then broke into full laughter, her hand brushing Syloki's hair back as she leaned close. "Yes, you mad bitch," she said, shaking her head in disbelief. "You tackled Lira. Knocked her straight down into the dirt, too. Everyone saw it, Sy. You hit her like a charging bull." Her laughter softened into warmth, a flicker of mischief glinting in her eyes despite the exhaustion etched deep into her face. "Though to be fair, you were swimming in terror gas, and it showed. I think she forgives you for it."

Still hazy, Syloki squinted up at her, the words landing with more weight than she expected. "Who… who knocked me out?" she asked, her voice uncertain, almost dreading the answer. Sheila sighed, though her lips kept twitching like she was holding back another laugh. "Tabatha. Claims you had become a liability in the field." The words dropped like stones in the quiet room. Syloki reached back gingerly, fingers brushing the tender knot swelling at the back of her skull. She winced, hissing through her teeth, then whispered with mock solemnity, "Oh, Taby, you massive whore."

That did it—Sheila let out a loud, genuine laugh, the kind that carried through her whole body. Syloki couldn't help but grin, even as her face ached from the strain of it all. The tension between them cracked like thin ice, spilling into relief, and they both shook with laughter until the sound blended with the soft rustle of the curtains and the distant hum of the city outside. For a moment, the long night, the blood, the screaming, the terror gas, it all dissolved into nothing but the comfort of being alive, together, and still laughing at the end of it. The day had been long, too long, but here in the warmth of the mansion, it finally felt over.

Chapter 07: **Between Masks**

The Twilight Lounge breathed with its usual hush of sin and jazz, a sanctuary for those who wore secrets like perfume. The lamps along the bar glowed low and amber, light spilling through the smoke like syrup over velvet. Outside, Silkbend's canals were a smear of silver and shadow, but here—inside this cocoon of dim murmurs and slow saxophones—the air was heavy with warmth and stories better left unspoken. Vesper moved like a ghost behind the counter, all quiet grace and the faint glint of rings on his long fingers, pouring drinks without ever really seeming to touch them. Arthur Xavier sat in his usual booth, the far corner one, where the curtain could be drawn if he wished it, though he rarely did. A half-empty bottle of the strong amber liquor he favored sat between his hands, catching the light in ripples as if the glass itself hummed with tension. His notes were spread out before him, scrawled diagrams, half-burned sketches, and lists of names and materials written in precise, angled handwriting. Across from him, Syloki's laugh rose soft and slanted, half-drowned by the jazz, her glass already nearly drained of the fruit-sweet concoction she preferred. She leaned her elbow on the edge of the table, chin resting on her palm, the lamplight pooling over her loose hair and glinting off the ring she twisted when she talked too fast.

"I might've, uh… used your name," Syloki said suddenly, eyes sliding up toward him from under her lashes, a mischievous flicker hiding the faint blush that rose behind it. Her tone was quick and airy, but the pause after it betrayed the alcohol's looseness in her voice. "At the hotel, I mean. Vida Nova." Her words came out with a little giggle that didn't belong there, as if she was trying to swallow her own admission with humor. Arthur's brow furrowed slightly, the muscles in his jaw shifting like clockwork tightening by degrees. He didn't speak right away, only took a slow sip from his glass, the kind of sip meant to fill silence rather than break it. Syloki shifted in her seat, her boot nudging his under the table—accidentally or not, it was unclear—and she coughed softly. "I know, I know. I should've asked first, but she was looking at me like she could smell the lie off my skin. Merenda—that woman's spine is a steel rod wrapped in lace. I had to shake her a little."

Arthur tilted his head, studying her over the rim of his glass. "You thought the best way to do that was to drag my name into it?" His voice was even, not angry, but it carried the weight of quiet disapproval, that slow, deliberate tone that could make a lesser person squirm. He set the glass down carefully, the sound of it clicking against wood like a gavel. "Why me?" The question hung there, not sharp but curious, something colder underneath it—a man who had lived too long surrounded by traps learning to test the ground beneath every step. Syloki hesitated, the smile flickering for a moment as if a breeze had passed through it. Her hand went to her drink again, swirling the last bits of fruit at the bottom with her straw before she answered. "Because I had to say something, Arthur. And I couldn't exactly name-drop the Gloam Sisters, could I? The Crows are already tangled in enough mess as it is, and everyone in Hexspire knows the Sisters hate their guts. Your name… it bought me a pause. A second to breathe."

The booth light caught her face just then, the faint shimmer of tiredness under her eyes, the touch of ink still smudged along her fingers from writing too much and resting too little. She laughed again, this time softer, a little rueful. "Besides, people tend to listen when I mention you. You've got that effect, you know? Half the city thinks you're some kind of urban myth—'the Cypher's hammer,' they call you." Arthur's lips twitched, almost a smile, though it didn't quite reach his eyes. "Hammerfall," he murmured, a name that came from others' mouths, never his

own. “It was meant to sound like deterrence, not legend.” Syloki smirked at that, leaning closer across the table. “Oh, don’t play humble. You like it. It’s got a nice ring.” Her voice carried a lazy charm, but the glance she gave him wasn’t playful—it lingered, as if testing the air between them. Arthur busied himself straightening one of his papers, not trusting himself to meet that look.

Her hand found her drink again, fingers tracing condensation circles onto the wood, leaving faint ghost-marks that blurred into one another. “Merenda didn’t flinch until I mentioned you,” she continued, her voice more serious now. “That name stopped her cold. I don’t know whether it was fear or respect, but it meant something. It got me past her damn bell, at least long enough to get Tobias’s name confirmed.” Arthur exhaled slowly, eyes narrowing as he considered this. “And you thought it worth the risk to link yourself to me? That could bring the wrong kind of attention.” His tone softened halfway through the sentence, as though the words themselves sounded harsher than he intended. Syloki shrugged, the motion loose, her grin returning like sunlight sneaking past clouds. “You say that like I’m not already up to my neck in wrong kinds of attention. I’m a Gloam Sister now, remember? That’s practically an invitation for trouble.”

The music behind them shifted—something slower, bluesier, the brass notes melting through the air like liquid smoke. A pair of gamblers argued softly near the bar, their laughter cracking like dice. Vesper glanced their way but said nothing. Arthur leaned back, running a thumb along the edge of his notes. “You didn’t have to think of me,” he said at last, almost under his breath, a confession disguised as an observation. Syloki’s brows lifted, and for a moment her usual wit faltered. The way he said it—quiet, like the idea unsettled him—hit her harder than she expected. She caught herself staring, lips parting as if to reply, then closing again when she couldn’t find the right words. Her heart gave a small, guilty flutter that she tried to drown with another sip. “Well,” she said finally, voice softer now, “I guess I did anyway.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, her cheeks flushed warm, not entirely from the drink.

Arthur studied her in that steady, analytical way of his, as though he were trying to decode her instead of the web of names and diagrams before him. The lamplight caught in the reflection of his spectacles, obscuring his eyes, but she could feel his attention like static. “You shouldn’t have,” he said, though it lacked conviction, the edge dulled by the ghost of a smile tugging at one corner of his mouth. Syloki rolled her eyes, leaning back with exaggerated exasperation. “Oh, relax, Hammerfall. No one’s summoning the Inquisition because I said I knew a charming man with too many gadgets and not enough sleep.” He huffed through his nose—a sound that might’ve been a laugh in another life—and reached for his glass again.

“I just didn’t expect you to think of me,” he admitted finally, voice roughened by the drink, by the weight of too many unspoken things. Syloki’s reply came slow, her tone losing some of its fizz. “You’ve been… around my thoughts more than I meant, lately.” She looked down at the condensation on the table again, tracing lazy circles with her fingertip. “Maybe it’s the work, maybe it’s the ghosts, maybe it’s just Doskvol getting smaller. I don’t know.” She looked up then, meeting his eyes squarely, a small, crooked smile finding its way back to her lips. “But when things start to spin, I tend to think of people who make sense. You’re one of the few that still do.”

Arthur didn’t answer right away. The band’s rhythm dipped into a softer refrain, and somewhere behind them, a glass shattered and laughter followed. He took another slow sip, letting her words hang between them like smoke neither of them wanted to clear. His hand shifted over the table, resting near the edge of her papers, not quite touching. “You should be careful what you say in places like this,” he said finally, but his tone was softer now, not a warning—almost a promise. Syloki grinned, the teasing returning in her eyes. “What, afraid someone might think I’m fond of you?” Arthur didn’t rise to the bait; he simply leaned back, the faintest ghost of a smirk on his lips. “I’d be more concerned if they didn’t.”

Syloki tilted her head as Arthur pushed another page across the table, the paper smudged at the edges, corners singed from a long day spent near open flame or worse. “Blueprints again?” she asked, her tone teasing, though her fingers reached for it before the question even finished leaving her mouth. Her quill, tucked behind her ear, caught the lamplight as she leaned forward, studying the diagram. The lines were meticulous—no artist’s hand, but a technician’s, all sharp edges and numbers packed into narrow margins. Arthur pointed to a narrow ring drawn near the device’s center. “That’s the dispersal valve,” he said quietly. “Except it wasn’t meant to disperse anything at first. The original Circle design was meant to ignite, not vent. Fire weapon. Emberlash’s work, no doubt. Merrow just…” He paused, as if the word itself left a sour taste. “Rebuilt it. Refined it for gas instead of flame. Ladher.” Syloki’s lips parted, a slow breath escaping her as she absorbed it. “He turned fire into madness,” she murmured, tracing the ring with a fingertip. “Deliberate chaos.” She shook her head, disgust softening her tone. “It’s one thing to burn the world. Another to make it tear itself apart.”

Arthur didn’t look up. His gaze stayed on the papers as if eye contact would make it heavier. “He’s not trying to destroy the city. He’s trying to make it watch itself rot. There’s a difference.” He lifted his glass and drank again, setting it down without a sound. Syloki tapped the edge of the blueprint, her nails clicking against the wood. “You’ve been busy,” she said finally, softer this time. “This kind of design work… it’s not just scavenged schematics. You’ve rebuilt pieces of it, haven’t you?” He didn’t answer right away, and the silence said more than his words could have. “I had to understand what I was up against,” he said eventually, his tone level, though his hand tightened slightly on the glass. She scribbled a note in her own small journal beside her—quick, precise. “Arthur Xavier. Got brains,” she muttered under her breath, almost like a joke to herself, and he arched a brow. “What was that?” “Nothing,” she said quickly, her quill dancing again.

She changed the subject before he could press. “Elias Wren,” she said, flipping through her notebook until his name appeared underlined three times. “You mentioned him last time. You still think he’s tied to Merrow?” Arthur nodded once, slow and certain. “I don’t think. I know. He’s the one who sold the LRM prototype—the Circle’s tech, stripped down and reassembled for private hands. He’s Merrow’s tinkerer now. Every gadget, every cursed trinket that hits the black market somehow leads back to Wren’s shop.” Syloki frowned, her pen stilling over the page. “Then he’s more than a middleman. He’s a broker of madness.” “And a coward,” Arthur added, voice clipped. “Never gets his hands dirty, never steps near the flames. But the city burns on his coin.” She nodded, eyes narrowing as she added a small note beside his name. “If he’s working for Merrow, that means he’s not just selling chaos—he’s feeding it. And if that’s true…” Her words trailed off, the thought too unpleasant to finish.

Arthur reached into his coat, pulling out another page, this one folded and stained dark at the edges. “Then there’s this,” he said, flattening it on the table. The sketch wasn’t mechanical this time. It was rougher, drawn by hand—the face of a man in uniform, expression blank, eyes vacant. “Espiritas officer. The one who drove the stolen carriage during the breakout.” He pointed to the jagged lines drawn beneath. “When he was stabbed, he didn’t bleed. He leaked mud. I don’t know what kind of creature he was, but he wasn’t human. Thought it might mean something to you.” Syloki leaned in, her brows knitting together as she stared at the sketch. “Mud,” she repeated softly. “Not blood.” She tapped the side of her glass thoughtfully. “Could be chemical alteration. Could be possession. Either way, I’ll dig through the Gloam archives. They keep texts on physical manifestations of corruption—things that shouldn’t live but do.” Arthur’s mouth tightened. “Just don’t get too close to whatever you find.” “You’re sweet when you worry,” she said absently, jotting down the words ‘mud-man – research required’ before he could protest.

Arthur moved on, his voice shifting back to that clipped, professional rhythm. “These are the names from the Ironscar escape,” he said, flipping a final note toward her. “Edwin Grieves, Victor Crowe, Mitchell Marlowe, Felix Coyle, Callum Dorne, Branagh Vey. The ones they caught.

There are others—unaccounted for." Syloki scanned the list, her expression tightening as she read. "I've seen at least three of these," she said finally, tapping the page with her quill. "They were at the chemical plant—the one soaked in terror gas. It was chaos. There was another name in my researches, though—someone called Mister Smile." Arthur froze at the name, his eyes flicking to hers sharply. "Smile? As in the performer? He used to run with the street shows before the war." Syloki's lips curved faintly, though her tone was grim. They shared a look—an unspoken understanding of what Merrow liked in his followers. "He collects performers," she said quietly. "People who can wear masks better than most." "People who can make others believe," Arthur finished for her, voice low.

Syloki sat back, setting her pen down. The air between them seemed heavier now, thick with implication. "Arthur," she said after a long pause, "you call it gas. Ladher. You keep saying it like it's science, but this—this doesn't feel like chemistry anymore." Arthur's gaze met hers, steady and cold. "That's where you're wrong. This isn't sorcery. It's worse. Ladher is engineered horror, built molecule by molecule. There's no spell to break it, no charm to counter it. Magic won't save anyone from this." His tone was absolute, the words final. Syloki exhaled slowly, the certainty in his voice leaving a quiet chill in her chest. She didn't argue, but her eyes flicked back to the sketch of the mud-man, then to the scattered notes of the Royal Gang. "Maybe not," she said softly, "but someone built this horror—and if he built it, he can break it." Arthur didn't reply. His gaze stayed fixed on the papers, his hand resting on the blueprint like a promise or a burden. The jazz played on, low and distant, as both fell into the silence of their thoughts—two minds chasing the same shadow from different sides of the dark.

Arthur leaned back in the booth, arms folded across his chest, the low light glinting faintly off the steel of his bracer. "You changed the subject," he said finally, voice even but carrying that quiet weight he used when he already knew he was right. Across from him, Syloki's lips curved into a grin that was all mischief and half-truths. "Did I? Funny, I could've sworn *you* were the one doing that when I brought up Elias Wren." She swirled her drink with lazy defiance, the fruit-sweet scent of it mingling with the spice of his whiskey between them. "You've been staring at those notes for so long, I thought they might start confessing before you did." Arthur sighed, rubbing a hand over his face before setting the glass down with a quiet thud. "I know Wren sold to the Circle," he said flatly. "I just don't know the what, when, or to whom. That's what I was hoping *you* could fill in." Syloki's expression softened, a flicker of guilt breaking through the teasing. "I haven't made much progress," she admitted, tracing her finger along the table's edge. "Been busy with something else. Some… delicate work." She met his gaze for only a moment before looking away. "And before you ask, I can't talk about it yet." Arthur tilted his head, studying her the way a craftsman studies a faulty gear. "Housework again?" he asked, deadpan. She snorted, hiding a smile behind her glass. "You're impossible."

Arthur didn't press further, though the silence between them thickened like smoke—dense, waiting, full of the things neither of them dared to say. The music from the corner saxophonist hummed low, a lonely tune curling through the haze and the flickering gaslight, softening the edges of the room's gloom. Arthur leaned forward and slid a map toward her, its corners smudged with ash and fingerprints. "You've been spending too much time in Hexspire," he said at last, his tone caught somewhere between concern and reproach. "Heard about the trouble at the Crimson Plant. What the hell happened there?" Syloki blinked, caught mid-sip, her glass hovering halfway to her lips before she set it down with care. "Ah, that," she said, her voice dipping into something quieter, the usual spark dampened. "We were supposed to keep it quiet, but… let's just say things got *loud.*" Her fingers drummed lightly against the table before she leaned back, one boot resting against the other, posture casual but her eyes distant. "It was worse than the reports said. The kind of worse that has a taste to it—metal and cinnamon and smoke. The Sisters went in thinking we were clearing remnants, not walking into a nightmare Merrow built."

She glanced down, the lamplight glinting against the faint sheen of moisture in her hair from the fog outside. “The place felt alive, Arthur. The air hummed, like it remembered being poisoned. Lira led us straight in—her and Pamela both. We brought… creatures.” Her voice stumbled slightly over the word, like she hadn’t decided whether it was pride or disgust. “The kind they keep hidden until it’s time to remind the city what real fear looks like. Stitched things, bone and sinew moving like they’ve forgotten they shouldn’t.” Her hand traced an invisible shape in the air, a nervous motion that didn’t stop even when she caught herself doing it. “And Merrow’s tricks—those are worse. Mind control. People turned into puppets, chanting like nursery rhymes gone wrong. And the rats, gods, the *rats.* They move like soldiers now, Arthur. You shoot one, and three more come for your throat. They don’t scatter—they *wait.*” She shuddered, her voice thinning to a whisper. “You ever see a tide made of teeth? That’s what it felt like.”

Arthur’s expression darkened as she spoke. His fingers tightened around his glass until it creaked faintly. “You fought through that?” he asked, voice low. She nodded, her mouth twisting into a humorless smile. “Fought? More like survived long enough to crawl out breathing. The Sisters didn’t all make it. The rats didn’t stop even when we burned them. They just kept coming—like something else was willing them forward.” Her gaze flicked toward him, quick, sharp. “And before you ask, yes. Tetch, Crane, Flanagan. The names you mentioned? They were there. I saw them. Leading it. Like generals of a plague.” Her voice faltered then, the image still raw behind her eyes. “You could smell them before you saw them. The chemicals, the fire, the madness—it all blurred together until it was hard to tell who was human anymore.”

Arthur’s jaw worked silently for a moment, his gaze fixed somewhere past her shoulder. “That’s Merrow,” he said at last, quiet and certain. “That’s what he does. Turns people into instruments, fear into an orchestra.” He leaned forward, elbows on the table, the edge of exhaustion etched into the lines around his eyes. “He’s evolving. Used to be chaos for chaos’ sake—now it’s method. Design.”

Syloki’s gaze drifted toward him, her tone losing its usual brightness. “You sound like you’ve seen it before.” Arthur’s eyes stayed on his notes, his thumb brushing over the blackened corner of a page. “I have,” he said. “Back in the day. Merrow was chaos, but there was precision behind the madness. Everyone fought him at some stage — during the fire bombings I tried again, thinking I could stop him.” He let out a bitter laugh, one without humor. “Didn’t last a minute.” For a heartbeat, the noise of the lounge seemed to dull, swallowed by that memory. Syloki’s hand twitched toward him before she thought better of it, settling back with a small nod. “You survived,” she said softly. “That counts for something.” Arthur’s gaze lifted to meet hers. “Survival isn’t victory,” he replied, his tone quiet but certain. She smiled faintly, a flicker of warmth trying to push through the heaviness. “You’d be surprised. Sometimes surviving *is* the victory.”

Syloki’s eyes wandered over his notes again, scanning the names, the blueprints, the half-burned diagrams of what he called the LRM. “So that’s what you’re chasing now,” she said. “This Ladher thing.” He nodded once. “It’s not like anything before. He’s moved from spectacle to system. He’s calculated now.” The way he said it made her chest tighten—the quiet certainty of a man who had seen what that calculation could do. “I thought I’d seen the worst of him,” she said, her tone quieter now. “At Vida Nova and at the Crimson Chemical Plant, the people there… they weren’t themselves. Like puppets. They just—moved. Eyes glassy, voices not their own.” Arthur’s hand froze halfway to his drink. “That’s Merrow,” he said darkly. “Turning innocents into weapons. That’s what he does. Doesn’t matter if it’s gas, words, or fear.” His jaw flexed, the memory of Adrian’s death flickering behind his eyes. “Ladher isn’t mystical. It’s engineered horror. Nothing divine or cursed about it—just deliberate cruelty.” Syloki looked down at her own notes, her hand trembling just slightly before she steadied it. “You say that like you believe magic’s clean,” she said softly. “It’s not.”

For a moment, neither spoke, their thoughts tangled in the invisible threads between science and sorcery. The dim lamplight flickered, painting faint gold against Arthur's notes and the shadow of Syloki's gloved hands as she flipped to a fresh page in her own journal. "You ever think," she said, voice quieter now, "that maybe Merrow didn't start as a monster? That maybe something made him that way?" Arthur gave her a sharp look, not angry, but wary. "You're asking the wrong question," he said. "Doesn't matter how he started. What matters is what he's doing now." Syloki hummed under her breath, unconvinced, and jotted something down in her small, tight handwriting. When she lifted her head again, her smile had returned, though it was softer this time. "You ever consider that maybe *I* ask the right questions, just at the wrong time?" He smirked, the faintest crack in his usual stoicism. "All the time," he said.

The lounge around them had grown quieter as the night deepened, most of the other patrons lost in their own conspiracies or solitude. Syloki leaned across the table, reaching for one of his notes, and Arthur let her. Their hands brushed for a heartbeat before she pulled back, pretending not to notice. "You've got something here," she murmured, pointing at the name scrawled in the corner—Elias Wren. "I should maybe get back to investigating him?" Arthur gave a small nod. "Be careful with that trail," he said. "He's more than a broker. He's Merrow's craftsman." Syloki arched an eyebrow. "Meaning?" "Meaning whatever Merrow dreams up, Elias finds a way to build." The words hung between them, heavy and grim, until she exhaled and wrote something quick into her diary. Arthur raised an eyebrow. "Adding something flattering?" he asked. "Oh, don't flatter yourself," she said with a grin. "Just keeping track." He chuckled under his breath, low and brief, before returning his attention to the blueprint fragments spread across the table. Syloki said with a sigh. "I'll never understand people like him," she said. "Good," Arthur replied quietly. "Means you haven't lost enough to become one."

The booth had settled into a rhythm, the air between them no longer taut with the tension of revelations but softening into something quieter, more human. The notes, the sketches, the cryptic diagrams—they still littered the table, but their weight seemed less crushing now, the ink stains less severe under the honeyed lamplight. Syloki leaned back with a faint stretch, arms above her head for a moment, then folding lazily behind her neck, the motion drawing a sigh from her lips that was half exhaustion, half relief. "You've been buried in this stuff too long," she said, voice lilting with that teasing warmth she always slipped into when trying to break a heavy silence. "You even sleep anymore, Hammerfall? Or do you just recharge by glaring at blueprints until they surrender?" Arthur didn't look up from his notes right away, but the corner of his mouth twitched, betraying the ghost of a smile. "Sleep's for people who aren't being hunted," he replied, his tone even, though his eyes betrayed something older—fatigue, yes, but also a strange peace in the routine of his own obsession. "And glaring's efficient. It keeps the ghosts away." Syloki chuckled softly, fingers playing with the straw in her empty glass. "Cute. I thought that's what I was for."

Arthur huffed, a quiet exhale that almost passed for laughter, shaking his head as he reached to pour himself another drink. The sound of the liquid hitting glass was slow and steady, like rain on rooftops, unhurried. "You still working for yourself, or just for the Sisters now?" he asked after a moment, his tone casual but his eyes sharp, as though measuring the edges of her answer. Syloki shrugged, tracing idle shapes on the condensation ring her glass had left behind. "Working with. Spying for. Trying not to get eaten by. Depends on the day." The way she said it carried her usual levity, but Arthur's gaze didn't waver. She could feel it, that quiet, wordless concern that came from someone who'd seen too many allies lost to ambition and loyalty alike. He didn't press the question, didn't need to; his silence said enough. "You don't have to worry," she added softly, almost without thinking. "I can handle myself." Arthur nodded, but the set of his jaw didn't ease. "That's not what I'm worried about," he said, his voice low, almost lost to the music. "I'm worried about the people around you."

Syloki blinked at that, the words catching her off guard. For a second, she didn't know what to say. She looked at him—really looked—and saw what she hadn't before. The faint lines at the corners of his eyes, carved by sleepless nights and the strain of holding a dozen worlds together without complaint. The soft flicker in his expression when he thought she wasn't looking, something like recognition, or maybe regret. "You mean the Sisters?" she asked, tone lighter than she felt. Arthur shook his head. "I mean whoever's standing next to you when the next storm hits." He raised his glass, but didn't drink; his eyes lingered on the amber reflection, the distorted shimmer of the lamplight inside it. "Doskvol eats loyalty. I'd rather not see it chew through another person worth keeping around." His words hung there, quiet and unadorned, and for once, Syloki didn't fill the silence. She just watched him, a small, secret smile ghosting her lips as warmth bloomed in her chest despite the chill of the hour.

When she did speak, her voice came out softer, more careful. "You talk like a man who's already written his own obituary," she said, tilting her head slightly, eyes glinting with curiosity. "You ever think about what comes after all this?" Arthur's brow furrowed faintly, as though she'd asked him in a language he hadn't spoken in years. "After?" he repeated, setting the glass down gently. "I don't plan that far ahead. You don't survive this kind of life by imagining endings." Syloki smiled, tapping her quill against her lips in thought. "I do. I think about it all the time. What it might look like if it ever stops raining, if the city ever quiets down long enough for me to forget the names on these pages." She gestured at her open notebook, its pages thick with scribbled notes and sketches. "But then I remember who I am, and I laugh at myself. The quiet would probably kill me before anything else could." Arthur's eyes softened a little, a rare crack in his pragmatic shell. "Maybe," he said quietly, "but I hope you get to find out."

She laughed at that, the sound small but sincere, curling into the haze of the room like a piece of music finding its way back home. "You're not as heartless as you pretend, you know," she teased, her tone warm, almost fond. Arthur gave her a sidelong look, one brow lifting. "Don't tell anyone," he said dryly. "Ruins the reputation." "Oh, I wouldn't dream of it," she said, grinning as she reached across the table to nudge one of his notes closer to him. She pulled her hand back, pretending to study her journal again, but her mind was elsewhere. For all his walls and measured tones, Arthur cared—genuinely, stubbornly. It wasn't in his words so much as the pauses between them, the way he listened when she spoke, the subtle shift in his voice when she mentioned danger. It was rare, in Doskvol, to meet someone whose concern wasn't transactional. The realization sat warm in her chest, and she found herself smiling for no reason she could name. Arthur noticed. He didn't say anything—he never did—but he noticed.

The lounge around them began to thin, patrons drifting out into the night one by one. The saxophonist had shifted to something softer now, a tune meant for those too tired to drink and too haunted to sleep. Vesper polished glasses at the bar, his movements steady and wordless, the faint scrape of glass against cloth echoing like a metronome in the fading chatter. The fog outside pressed gently against the windows, a reminder that the city still waited, patient and hungry. Syloki's voice broke the lull again, lighter this time, like a spark flickering in the quiet. "You ever get tired of this?" she asked. "The scheming, the chasing, the endless games people play?" Arthur didn't answer immediately. He looked past her, into the dimness of the lounge, eyes reflecting the amber light. "You don't get tired of gravity," he said finally. "You just learn how to fall without breaking too much." She laughed softly, shaking her head. "You always make despair sound poetic." "It's a survival skill," he said simply.

They lingered like that, the space between their words filled by the hum of the city pressing faintly through the glass—the distant rattle of a carriage, the echo of boots on wet cobblestone, the faint, rhythmic drip of water from the canal outside. Syloki leaned her chin into her hand again, watching him with a kind of quiet fascination. "You know," she said after a while, "you'd make a terrible liar." Arthur arched an eyebrow. "Excuse me?" "It's true," she said, grinning. "You've got this tell when you try to hide something. You get all still, like you're trying not to

breathe.” He gave her a flat look, but the faint rise of color at his collar betrayed him. “And here I thought I’d perfected subtlety.” “Not to me,” she said lightly, though her voice softened near the end. He didn’t reply, but the way his gaze lingered told her he’d heard every word. When she finally spoke again, her voice was lower, more thoughtful. “You ever wish you’d met someone before all this?” she asked, her tone half-playful, half-serious. Arthur looked at her over the rim of his glass, his expression quiet, almost unreadable in the lamplight. “Before what?” he asked, though the words came slower than usual, careful. “Before the masks,” she said softly. “Before Doskvol decided who we had to be.” He didn’t answer right away. His gaze drifted down to the scattered papers between them, to the ink stains smudged by his own hand, and for a moment his thumb brushed the edge of one page like he might steady himself on it. When he finally spoke, his voice was low, roughened by something she couldn’t quite name. “Maybe,” he said. “But if I had, I’d have had to keep them far from all this—far from the Cyphers, far from me. Only way to keep them safe.” He took another slow drink, eyes fixed on the amber swirl inside the glass as if the reflection there might show him a world that could’ve been. Syloki watched him in silence, thinking he was just being his usual guarded self, while something unspoken tightened quietly in his chest.

The night had deepened around them, the lamp above their booth flickering once as if tired from the weight of their secrets. Outside, the fog thickened, pressing its pale hands against the windows until the canal lights blurred into distant halos. Syloki watched it for a moment, her mind miles away, lost in the branching paths of all the things she hadn’t said. She could tell him now, she thought—the truth about Lira, the defaced portraits, the whispers in the Gloam halls about the fire that bound her to Merrow. He deserved to know. And yet, as her eyes drifted back to him, to the quiet steadiness in his posture, the faint shadow of a man who carried too many burdens already, she swallowed the words before they could form. Not tonight. Instead, she smiled, small and tired but real, and reached for her drink again. The conversation moved on, lighter now—old stories, strange memories, a rare moment of laughter that felt almost like peace. The night held them in its dim, forgiving glow, two souls anchored for a moment in the storm, unaware of how fragile that calm truly was.

Interlude: In the Wake of Assumption

What follows takes place during the events of

Crows in the Ashes, Chapter 8: In the Wake of Assumption.

Here, you will witness those same moments through the eyes of Silas Thorn. For the full story, please pick up a copy of Crows in the Ashes.

Interlude: **In the Wake of Assumption**

Silas sat balanced in the crook of an old elm, its branches bowed over the manicured courtyard of the Assumption Church, leaves whispering faintly in the early light. He did not see the world through his own eyes, but through the glossy black gaze of his crow gliding high above the chapel spires. The connection was total—every shift of air under wings, every murmur of street noise, every flicker of movement below pulsed behind his eyelids as though he himself were in flight. From above, the church looked immaculate: stone walls freshly washed by rain, the brass bell tower glinting under the pale sun, the courtyard swept clean save for the occasional priest or worshiper crossing the cobbles. It stood as a relic of beauty in a district known for grime and desperation, its upkeep almost defiant. Through the crow's sight, Silas watched the Crows—the crew newly risen from Crow's Ward—slip into the scene with the practiced grace of wolves among sheep. He liked their name, perhaps for the omen it carried, but trust was another matter. He tracked them as they divided: Jack and Rabbit sliding quietly through the front doors beneath the painted saints, while Harleena, Harry, and Boquinha circled to the rear through the servant's path behind the vestry. The crow wheeled lazily, sharp-eyed, marking every move, every tremor in the air that might hint at danger.

From its perch atop the steeple, the crow tilted its head and took in the symmetry below. Churchgoers knelt before the altar, their murmured prayers swallowed by the choir's low chant. A row of children carried candles up the aisle, their faces solemn and unknowing. Yet just beyond them, shadows slid between the pews—Jack's figure bending low, Rabbit's gloved hand tracing the marble edge of a confessional as if measuring distance. At the rear entrance, Boquinha stood near a side door with Harry beside her, both half-hidden by the carved arch. She whispered something, quick and deliberate, and the boy nodded, his hand hovering near his satchel where the familiar hum of electroplasm stirred. The smell of incense clung to the air, sweet and cloying, and through his crow Silas could feel the vibration of the organ beneath the hymns, a heartbeat cloaked in piety. The Crows had entered holy ground. The Ember Circle had made it their den.

Silas's crow circled again, its cry cutting through the music, and he caught a glimpse of movement near the altar—a cluster of men dressed in black, pretending to pray but keeping their coats too close, their eyes too sharp. The Circle's soldiers. They blended with the faithful, masks of devotion concealing the weapons beneath. The air around them shimmered faintly, that telltale heat-haze of fire cult energy. Through the crow, Silas noted their formation, their angles of cover, their timing. His breath caught, steadying with effort. This was no blind strike by the Crows; it was a reclamation, vengeance wrapped in ritual.

The memory of the Iron Den bled into the moment, sharp and invasive. Silas could still taste the smoke from that night—the Circle's cowardly assault, the shrieking fire that tore through the orphanage, and Ulric Stoneborn's decision to end it with fire of his own. He had found Ulric later, half-buried in soot and rubble, the boy's thin hands trembling but his eyes burning with cold fury. They said Emberwing died that night, the Circle's second-in-command caught in the blast, but Silas never saw a body. And in Doskvol, a missing body was a promise of future pain. Now Ulric believed Emberwing was hiding here, beneath this immaculate church, and Silas believed it too.

But his purpose ran deeper than the hunt. Beneath the vengeance, beneath the smoldering hate, there was the hollow ache of something simpler—loss. Adrian Blackwood's face haunted him, caught forever in that moment before the end, when the glass cage filled with violet fog and his screams twisted into silence. Silas had watched him die for a spectacle, powerless to stop it, and since that night the city's noise had sounded like echoes of that death. The twins—Luis and Nico—had vanished the same night. Just three years old. Just gone. It was why he'd taken this

mission, why he'd tolerated the chaos of working alongside criminals and children alike. Ulric had promised him information on the twins' whereabouts if Silas helped ensure Emberwing's death. The Circle owed too many ghosts, and this church would soon pay its tithe in blood.

The crow shifted, landing on the edge of a stained-glass window. Through its hearing, Silas caught Boquinha's small voice again, sharp with command as she and Harry stood poised by the back entrance. Inside, Jack's voice murmured quick orders, Rabbit's reply low and certain. Harleena laughed—soft, mirthless, almost joyful—as she stalked through the side chapel, blade gleaming like sunlight through colored glass. Silas's heart thudded slow, steady. His crow turned its head toward the altar, where the first chant of the Circle began to rise—an invocation to flame masked as liturgy. Candles flared, and the scent of sUlricur laced the air.

Silas tightened his grip on the branch, the bark cutting his palm, grounding him in the moment. Through the link, he could hear the congregation's murmurs, the scrape of boots, the small tremor that always came before the first strike. The world held its breath. He thought of Adrian, of the promise whispered to ashes—I'll find them. I swear it. Below, Boquinha glanced upward, her eyes narrowing, and for an instant he thought she saw him hidden in the trees. He didn't move. He couldn't afford to. The crow adjusted its wings, settling deeper into shadow as sunlight spilled across the courtyard in fractured beams.

Jack's hand flashed in a signal, the faint glint of steel catching the light. Silas's crow gave a single low caw, the sound swallowed quickly by the hymn. Every muscle in Silas's body tensed. The Crows were in position, the Stoneborn's hidden purpose unfolding beneath their cover, and through it all Silas's own mission burned like a quiet coal. He would find Emberwing, he would find the twins, and he would see Doskvol's monsters brought to ruin. Because even in daylight, this city was built on shadows—and some promises, like ghosts, refused to die.

The air around the back door pressed heavy, thick enough to taste—old metal, candle smoke, and the tension of two tempers colliding. Through the eyes of my crow, I watched Boquinha pacing in front of the locked door, her little shoes striking the stone with impatient rhythm. The sound was sharp, repetitive, like a clock winding tighter. She moved in short lines, shoulders squared, chin high, her small body coiled with more anger than her size should have allowed. Every few steps she threw a look at Harry, that glare of hers half daring, half commanding. She wasn't nervous—no, it was something else. Anticipation. Calculation. I'd seen that look before in men twice her age, the kind that kill to make a point.

Harry stood still beside the door, expression calm, hands steady at his sides. He didn't rise to her words, just watched her with that strange quiet he always carried, a quiet that made even ghosts hesitate. I heard her through the crow's ears, the small but fierce tremor in her voice when she barked, "No more waiting, Harry. Open the damn door now." It came out sharp and venomous, too sure for a child, too old for innocence. Harry didn't flinch. "Not until Harleena comes back," he said, tone smooth, measured, like he was reciting a rule he'd written himself. I could almost feel the stillness between them—the kind that means something is about to break.

Boquinha stopped pacing. The change in her face was quick, dangerous. I saw it through the flick of the crow's vision—the pout gone, lips pressed thin, eyes hardening into something crystalline and cruel. Her hand darted to her belt, movement practiced, fluid. When she brought the knife up, the steel caught the light and flashed like lightning through stained glass. "I said open it, now." Her voice had dropped to a low, deliberate hiss, every syllable wrapped around the knife's point. For a heartbeat she didn't look human. She looked like the streets she came from—sharp, small, and hungry.

Harry's eyes flickered, his calm finally shifting into focus. He saw it then—the truth I already knew. Boquinha wasn't some frightened child following orders. She was Ulric's creature, through

and through. I felt the pull of his power in her stance, the cold echo of the Iron Den still clinging to her. Harry didn't back away. He just breathed once, slow, the faint hum of electroplasm beginning to rise around him. The crow tilted its head, feathers ruffling in the static.

Then he vanished. No sound, no flash—just gone. The air folded around the space where he'd been, the light bending, sound slipping thin. Boquinha's blade cut through it, a flash of motion that met nothing but air. She spun, scanning the shadows, the knife slicing another quick arc, her voice breaking the stillness in a low snarl. "What the hell?! Where did you go, Harry?" The echo of her words carried through the crow's hearing, bouncing off stone and iron.

From my perch above, I watched her stance settle again—one foot back, knife ready, grip perfect. Not a trace of fear. Just patience, the kind that waits for a target to reappear. Her frame was small, her face deceptively delicate, but every line of her body knew violence. For all her size, she wasn't a child at all. She was a knife given a name. And she was smiling.

It didn't take long for her to figure it out. Through the crow's eyes I saw her glance up at the rooftops, at the sky that was too pale for Doskvol's taste, then back at the door. "Are you coming or not?" she muttered, her words barely more than a thread of sound. "I have him." I almost laughed, quiet and low. Of course she said it out loud. She knew the bird was mine, knew I was listening, knew she didn't need to see me to speak to me. Always too clever, that one. The crow adjusted its perch, claws scraping stone, and when she turned her face upward, I sent it down. Its wings caught the light in a sharp sweep of blue oil and shadow, the feathers glossy as wet ink. It landed beside her with a little hop, beak clicking once. "Get your ass down here now, Silas!" she said, and the tone was almost lazy, too cool, too calm for the tension bleeding off her. "He's really here, I knew it wasn't just rumors. He's ours now." The crow croaked once, rough and sharp, the sound coming through my head like a pulse of static. I smiled. Emberwing, we got you. You die today, once and for all.

Boquinha crouched down, the knife already gone, a thin sliver of a pick flashing between her fingers. The motion was clean, quick, mechanical. Her hands didn't shake, not even a tremor. I watched her through the crow's eyes as she knelt in front of the door and worked the lock like she was whispering to it. Tumblers clicked in sequence, rising in neat little tones that carried even from my distance. Then the hinges groaned, slow and heavy, as the door opened inward. The air that came out was old and sour—antiseptic, sweat, the ghost of burnt things. I dropped from the tree, the ground hitting my boots with a solid thud. My fingers found the crawlies in my satchel without thinking, five little devices no bigger than coins. I set them loose one by one, their thin legs clicking over the floor as they scattered into the corners. Scouts, mines—doesn't matter the name. They were my eyes and my trap. Anything breathing too hot, exhaling carbon in the dark, they'd find it. And if they had to blow, they'd make sure nothing walked out of this place alive.

Boquinha had already stepped through, her small frame swallowed by the thin yellow light inside. I followed, the stink of chemicals and charred flesh hitting me like a wall. The air felt too still, the kind that always sits just before something terrible. The corridor ahead was narrow, lined with shadow and soundless. Somewhere deeper inside came a faint hum, an electric whine. For a heartbeat I forgot Harry existed. Those with magic—always unpredictable, always vanishing when you needed them. He'd resurface when the fight was done, if he was smart. But our work tonight wasn't him. It was Emberwing.

The room we entered widened suddenly, and the sight hit me like a gut punch. The light was weak, thin and green through a stained window, casting that saintly glow on sin. A single bulb hummed overhead, throwing its weary light over what could've been a hospital if not for the rot of it. Beds lined the room, metal frames streaked with rust and blood. Crates were stacked along the walls, bottles and rags and instruments laid out in messy order. And there, at the far

end, was him. Emberwing. Not ash, not rumor, not memory. Flesh and ruin. His body was wrapped in brown-stained bandages, chest to jaw, one leg gone below the knee. His skin looked half melted, half reborn in patchwork. Tubes fed into his arms, dripping some bitter-smelling medicine that couldn't hide the stink of infection. He looked more corpse than man, and yet his voice—gods, his voice—was still that same booming arrogance I remembered. "Where the hell is everyone?" he barked, the sound rough but strong, commanding the air itself to listen. "What's going on out there?!" His words made the light tremble, the air thickening with the heat of his rage.

Boquinha didn't flinch. She took one small step forward, slow and deliberate, her shadow stretching across the floor like a dark crown. The light from the window found her, clung to her, painted her in green fire. I saw the recognition crawl across Emberwing's face, the twitch of disgust that cut through his ruined features. "You," he spat, lips curling back from yellow teeth. "I should've known. You… filthy little brat." The word carried spite sharpened by memory, his voice cracking with the effort of venom. She tilted her head slightly, that same calm mask never slipping. "Do you have any idea what's going to happen to you now, Emberwing?" she said, and her tone was water over stone, soft, cold, inevitable. She stood easy, hands loose at her sides, as though this was just another errand. I'd seen executioners tremble more.

I stepped into the light then, and the temperature in the room changed. Emberwing's eyes cut toward me, recognition flashing like sparks in a dying fire. My whole body felt wired, drawn tight, the anger under my skin finally given a face to aim at. I didn't speak, not yet. Just looked at him. I let him see it—the hate, the weight of every scream from that night, every second of Adrian's death I'd had to sit through. I let him see what that made of me. Emberwing tried to sneer, tried to pull himself upright on his elbows, but his body betrayed him. His breath rasped shallow and hot. "Silas Thorn? You?" he snarled, the sound tearing out of him like metal grinding against itself. "You're really here to finish this, huh? You think I'm just gonna die like this? Idiots, all of you!" The bed creaked under his fury, the air shivering from the heat that still lived in him. And for the first time that day, I didn't need to see through the crow to know how this would end.

"I'm not just here to finish you, Emberwing," I growl, each syllable a rasp dragged over the knife-edge of what I've buried. The words come thick, the restraint fraying with every breath; my fists tighten until my knuckles light, my jaw like a vise. "I'm here to make sure you never hurt anyone again." I can feel the wire of it—anger coiled so fine it might snap—and I hold it because losing it would make me no better than the men who burned an orphanage for sport. "My friend, Adrian Blackwood... you killed him. Sold him to Pennwright like he was nothing, a pawn to parade in some grotesque display. You stripped him of dignity and life, and I had to stand there in the wreckage of what you set into motion. And now, I'm going to make you pay for that. You're going to die today, Emberwing. You and your boss—your whole rotten Circle—are going to choke on what you've sown." Saying it makes my mouth taste like iron; saying it makes the air in the room tilt toward verdict.

Emberwing answers with a laugh that splinters like dropped glass, sharp and ugly, and the sound scrapes at something in my chest. He shakes in the bed as if the movement could throw off pain and pride both, the bandages tugging across burned skin. "You think I'm afraid of you?" he spits, voice a broken branch that still refuses to go down. "After everything I've survived, after the fire and the ashes you left me in, you think a rat like you can end me? You can't kill me, Thorn. You can't even touch me. I'll spit blood in your face before I beg for mercy. I'll make sure you regret the day you even whispered my name." His words are bile, practiced and perfumed with venom, and the room tastes of it; I let the crow feed me the details—how his breath rattles, how his eyes glitter with spite—and I press the hate back to keep it from making me reckless.

Harry steps out of the shadows then, his form resolving like a photograph coming up in a darkroom, invisibility draining away in a shimmer. Boquinha's head snaps; for a flash the child's

mask slips and something almost human flickers—surprise, small and ridiculous—then the iron drops and she becomes the instrument again. I am faster. My gun is up before thought finishes forming, leveled at Harry's chest, cold and measured. The Cypher spiders tick at the edges of the room like small, mechanical heartbeats. Harry doesn't flinch; he raises his hands slowly, palms open, voice steady. "Don't shoot," he says, every syllable a carefully placed stone over thin ice. "I'm not here to fight you." The words make me hesitate, just enough.

Suspicion crackles under my skin like static; my finger wants to find the trigger, to end the uncertainty with a single, clean motion. But Harry's tone stalls me. There's something in his calm that buys a sliver of time, and Boquinha's head tilts with the predatory calculus of someone sizing up merit. Emberwing's contempt spills again, a fresh torrent: "You think I care who you are, kid? Insects. All of you are the same. Scurrying, scratching, pretending you matter. You're already dead, you just don't know it yet." His spit of words finds the room and sticks. Harry's face tightens; his hands tremble under the weight of memory, but his voice is cold and deliberate when he answers. "I don't care if you remember me, Emberwing. But you're going to hear me loud and clear now. The game is over. You lost." The certainty in his tone is a thing he forged inside, and I watch it because I need to believe someone still has the nerve to speak like that.

Beneath the veneer of calm, Harry's mind reels with what we all carry—the orphans' cries, the orphanage's blackened ribs, the heat that painted everything red then grey. He steadies himself with the brittle patience of the burned. "I hope you believe in God, Emberwing," he says, voice a blade honed until it bites. "And I hope your god is a forgiving one. Because he's your last chance. I will never forgive you for what you've done." Emberwing's eyes flare molten with hate; he convulses against the sheets and, in a final spiteful motion, spits a glob of blood and bile that lands stippled on Harry's shoulder. The warmth of it blooms like a brand. "You're all going to die too," he hisses, voice raw and spiteful, a curse flung like a stone meant to skip across our skin and sting long after he's gone. I feel the room tilt on that sound, the moment suspended between an old vow and whatever comes next.

Harry froze for a single heartbeat, and in that brief stillness I saw the shift—the sharp twist of his grin, the flicker in his eyes that wasn't fear but something rawer, heavier. Determination. Rage, maybe. "That's where you're wrong," he said, voice low enough that even through my crow it sounded like a promise meant for one man alone. Before I could even draw breath, his hand was already moving. Reflex. Instinct. The kind that comes before thought has time to argue. The gun was in his grip, steady and sure, leveled right between Emberwing's eyes. The world drew in around that thin, perfect line—the sight, the breath, the heartbeat before judgment. Then came the thunder.

The gunshot ripped the air in two. The sound cracked through the church basement like a curse hurled at God Himself, echoing off the walls in a metallic scream. Emberwing's body jerked back hard, a violent twitch that snapped through every burned muscle before he slumped lifelessly against the bed. His head lolled, eyes wide, that final snarl frozen in place, a look of defiance that hadn't survived the bullet. For a moment, there was nothing but the smell—gunpowder, blood, antiseptic, and smoke curling lazy ghosts into the stale air. The silence afterward felt heavier than any scream could have.

Harry stood there, gun trembling faintly in his hand, eyes locked on what he'd done. His chest rose and fell fast, shallow, like he'd been holding his breath for hours and suddenly remembered he needed to breathe. The adrenaline tore through him, shaking his bones, painting his face with disbelief. His throat worked around a breath he couldn't quite swallow. First kill—anyone could see it. It clung to him, the shock, the wrongness, the irrevocability of it. You could always tell when someone crossed that line for the first time; the world shifted under them and never turned back right again. The line had been crossed, and the air itself felt heavier for it. But beneath that weight, I knew what mattered. The job was done. Emberwing was dead.

Then I heard it—the bell. Not the church's soft chime, but the sharp, mournful toll of the Espiritas bell, rolling out across Ashvale like a summons. It meant the dead had been claimed, and the city's spirit-hunters would soon come swarming to investigate. We wouldn't have long before this place turned into a sanctified cage. I turned my attention back to Boquinha, and our eyes met—hers bright and unflinching, mine cold and hard as the crow's. For a moment we just stared, neither of us surprised, both of us calculating the next move in the same breath.

She spoke first, smooth and dismissive, her tone slicing through the silence like a silver knife. "Well," she said with that infuriating calm, "that still achieves our goals, so it's fine by me." Her voice carried no tremor, no remorse, just that airy confidence that made her seem untouchable. She gave a tiny shrug, casual as if Harry's gunshot had been the closing of a door instead of an execution. That indifference lit something in me. I moved before thought could temper it, stepped forward and seized her by the arms, pulling her off balance. My grip locked like iron. "Don't play games with me, kid," I snarled, voice low and shaking with fury. "Your innocent act never worked with us Cyphers. Not once. I've been watching you since day one, keeping you from making messes bigger than you could crawl out of. And I'm done pretending." I leaned closer, felt her pulse quick under my fingers. "Now tell me where they are."

She didn't flinch. Not once. Her lips twitched into the smallest smile, the kind that knows exactly how close it is to getting hit and still enjoys the risk. Her eyes gleamed, sly and unreadable. The silence stretched, brittle, ready to break, before she exhaled softly and spoke, smooth and deliberate. "You already knew where they were, if you thought about it for a minute." Her tone dripped with mockery, every word a needle meant to prick. I didn't let go. She tilted her head, studying me, clearly savoring her advantage before deciding to twist the knife. "Fine," she said, that childish lilt curling around something older. "Our group's scattered after the attack, hiding out, regrouping. But those two…" She pointed, vague but confident. "They're being taken care of by Jackie Comber of the Unseen. Deadlands hideout."

The words settled like ash, thick and choking. Even Harry felt it—the temperature in the room dropping, the kind of silence that follows the truth when it's too big to look at. Jackie Comber. The Unseen. The Deadlands. I knew what that meant before my mind could even piece it together. My jaw locked tight; the name alone was enough to make my blood run cold. I let the revelation sink its claws in for a breath, then turned away, releasing Boquinha with a rough shove. The movement carried no hesitation—just purpose, the kind that leaves nothing else standing in its way. My cloak snapped behind me as I strode toward the door, the echo of her words following close like ghosts. The conversation was finished. I had what I came for.

The night pressed close around me as I strode out of the church, the heavy doors groaning shut behind me like the end of a confession. I didn't look back. There was nothing worth looking back at. Emberwing was dead. I'd seen enough corpses to know when a soul had fled, and that one—his—was gone to whatever pit waited for monsters. The Espiritas bell still echoed faint in the distance, rolling through the narrow streets like a requiem, but it didn't reach me. My boots hit the cobblestones in a steady rhythm, each step pulling me further from the stench of blood and gunpowder, closer to the cold air that stung the lungs clean. Harry, Boquinha—none of them mattered now. They were pieces of a different board. My part in this was done. The fire was out, and the ashes were cooling. I had what I came for.

The name stuck to me like a curse. Jackie Comber. The Mist. Leader of the Unseen. If Boquinha was telling the truth—and I had no reason to doubt her, not when deceit was her default—then the Blackwood twins were with him. It made a crooked kind of sense. Lost children always found their way to Ulric's orbit one way or another, and when his network scattered, the Unseen were the next shadow deep enough to hide in. Jackie had a talent for disappearing, for keeping the city's forgotten folded neatly under his wing. A ghost among ghosts. Maybe he was their protector now. Maybe that was enough. But the Deadlands… the

Deadlands were another matter entirely. No sane soul called that place safe. The wind itself carried whispers there, and the ground remembered the dead too well.

The more I thought about it, the more unease rooted itself in my chest. The twins were only children—barely out of toddlerhood, fragile things still learning the sound of their own laughter—and now they were hidden somewhere in a wasteland ruled by devils and phantoms. Jackie Comber was said to bear the Mark of the Devil, cursed and blessed in the same breath, his will bound to some infernal power older than the city itself. They said his eyes could see the future. That he moved his gang of shadow-born assassins like pieces on a board only he could see. If that was true, then the twins were safe for now. If it wasn't… they were already in the lion's mouth, and I was walking blind into its throat to pull them out.

A cold wind scraped down Ashvale's empty lanes, cutting through my coat and filling the night with the smell of iron, ash, and salt. My crow took flight above me, circling once before vanishing into the haze. I didn't need its eyes now. My own were sharp enough, fixed ahead, already imagining the path that led beyond the city, into the pale expanse where the ghosts roamed freely. I'd have to find Ulric again, pry the truth from him, the exact spot in the Deadlands where Comber's people kept their nest. That little bastard owed me that much, at least. The Stoneborn had made me their ally once, but if he lied to me again, I'd turn his orphanage into another crater before he could blink.

The streets narrowed as I walked, buildings leaning in like eavesdroppers, gaslight trembling in their glass throats. I could almost hear the children's laughter in the echoes, thin and far away, like a dream refusing to die. Luis and Nico. Adrian's boys. The only part of him left in this broken world. They didn't deserve to be pawns in anyone's war—not mine, not Ulric's, not Jackie's. They were just two scared kids who'd lost everything. My pace quickened, boots striking sparks against the stones. I could already feel the weight of the pistol at my hip, the ache of purpose in my chest.

Take care, Luis. Take care, Nico. Uncle Silas is coming. It's going to be all right. I told myself the words as if they were a prayer, though I knew better than to believe in those anymore. Still, I said them, let them sit heavy on my tongue as I disappeared into the fog. The city swallowed me whole, and somewhere beyond its edge, the Deadlands waited—black, wide, and whispering.

Chapter 08: **The Smiling One**

Ashvale at night breathed like a dying lung, slow and ragged, each gust of wind pulling soot and fog through its ribs. The lamps flickered with that sickly, half-hearted light unique to this part of the city, their flames stuttering behind filmy glass like they knew better than to shine too bright. The air smelled of salt from the docks, coal smoke from the factories, and that constant undercurrent of mildew that came from the canals cutting through old brick. It was a district made for ghosts and thieves both—where every shadow offered a corner to vanish into, and every eye that saw too much learned to look away again. You could make a living here if you were quiet, hungry, and cruel enough not to care who you stole from.

By day, the streets still crawled with the smallest Stoneborn—barefoot pickpockets and wide-eyed runts who learned to survive before they learned to read. They used to dart through these alleys in bright daylight, shouting, laughing, scamming, living faster than anyone twice their age. The other gangs let them be; superstition or pity, it didn't matter. Those kids had Ulric Stoneborn's blood behind them, and that meant even the meanest killer thought twice before laying a hand on one. But lately the alleys had gone quiet. No laughter, no scampering feet, no flashes of dirty faces ducking behind crates. It was the wrong kind of silence—the kind that came after loss. Arthur had seen enough of that to know it by sound alone. He didn't need to wonder where they'd gone.

The ruins of the Iron Den still stood like a wound in the middle of Ashvale, blackened beams jutting from its ribs, the skeleton of what once sheltered a hundred forgotten souls. Ulric had blown it apart himself—half the block gone in a thunder of fire and splintered brick when the Ember Circle dared storm the place, their zealots turning a home into a battlefield. He'd made sure the children were clear before he lit the fuses. I remembered the fire that night, rising orange and vicious through the fog, the sound of Ulric's voice echoing over the crackle—raw, furious, unbroken. The Iron Den had burned like a funeral pyre and a warning all at once. What stood now was a hollow carcass behind wooden barricades and Imperial tape.

But Doskvol didn't waste time mourning—not when there were votes to win. The construction crews had moved in already, hammers clanging even under moonlight, scaffolds groaning where walls used to crumble. In this city, repairs never came that fast unless someone stood to profit. And everyone in Ashvale knew exactly whose coin was paying for this miracle. Captain Morian Ishtar—the Imperial Police's golden knight and the man who fancied himself the next governor of Doskvol. His banners were plastered across the district now, polished smile and promises printed bold beneath that gleaming badge. Rebuilding the Iron Den was his latest act of charity, a public prayer for forgiveness from the very people his men had once terrorized.

I stopped by the barricade for a moment, boots sinking slightly into the wet clay where the cobbles had been torn up for new foundation. The night smelled of sawdust, iron, and that faint chemical tang that only ever came with Imperial-grade work. The old signboard—half melted, the letters "IRON D—" still visible—hung nailed against the new framework, like someone had wanted to keep the ghost as decoration. It made my stomach twist. Even the ruins of kindness didn't stay untouched in this city; they were repurposed, polished, and sold as symbols. Ishtar wanted his redemption framed in brick and mortar, and Doskvol would probably let him have it if it meant one less ruin to look at.

I turned away before the anger settled too deep. Emberwing was already dead—Silas had seen to that. But Emberlash was still out there, somewhere in the dark, and he was the reason for all of this. The Ember Circle had called it holy war, but it was just slaughter wrapped in scripture. I kept my pace steady as I moved deeper into the narrow streets, each turn Gloam and colder

than the last. I couldn’t afford rage tonight. There was work to be done, and revenge had its own clock. The alleys ahead narrowed into silence, the kind of silence that means someone’s waiting. I adjusted my gloves, felt the weight of the revolver at my side, and stepped into the fog. Ulric Stoneborn didn’t summon people without purpose—and if he’d called me here, it was for something worth the risk.

At a dark alley, away from watching eyes, Arthur waited, putting the bag he was carrying on the ground. The air here was thick, soured by the smell of rotting coal, rust, and the faint metallic tang of old blood that never truly washed away. It was a forgotten artery of Ashvale, a narrow slit between crumbling brick and rain-slick stone, just far enough from the lamp-lit main street that no enforcer would bother wandering in. Water dripped steadily from a cracked gutter, its rhythm merging with the distant hum of the city like a broken metronome. Arthur stood still, gloved fingers brushing the handle of his pistol in the dark, his coat collar turned high against the wet night air. Every instinct screamed caution, but he had learned long ago that fear was just another tool — like a match or a blade — useful only if wielded properly. His breath misted faintly before him, slow and controlled. Behind the fog, the sound of steps approached, slow, deliberate, each one sharper than the last. The Stoneborn had arrived.

Ulric Stoneborn stepped into view first, tall for fifteen, framed by the alley’s half-light and the faint orange glow of a distant lamp. His silhouette looked carved from soot and fire, a child molded by war and tempered by defiance. The heavy leather coat he wore was too big for him, sleeves rolled and cuffs torn, the shoulders dusted in black ash that never seemed to wash away. A coal-smudged scarf was knotted tightly around his throat, the kind men wore to hide the scars left by hard lives and harder choices. His boots crunched against broken glass as he advanced, slow and measured, as though every step declared ownership of the street beneath him. His eyes, storm-blue and unblinking, fixed on Arthur with a weight far older than his years, the kind of stare that could cut through armor and lies alike. Behind him, the faint metallic rattle of weapons and chains echoed softly, reminding Arthur that Ulric never truly came alone.

Flanking him were two shadows — boys, barely men — their outlines sharp against the faint haze of rain. To his left stood Boquinha, her presence a strange contradiction that Doskvol had learned to fear. She was small, almost delicate at first glance, bright-eyed with a sugar-sweet smile that didn’t belong in an alley that smelled of death. But her smile didn’t reach her eyes. Those eyes gleamed with the stillness of a serpent before the strike, and when she tilted her head to look at Arthur, the motion was too slow, too deliberate. She looked at him like she was testing the edges of something sharp. A patchwork jacket hung from her shoulders, the hem frayed and spotted with ink-black stains that weren’t ink. At her hip rested a dagger, its blade polished clean but for one nick along the edge — a reminder that it had tasted flesh before. The lamplight caught it once, briefly, and the glint that flashed back at Arthur felt almost like a wink.

On Ulric's right was Cuzão, quieter than the others, and jittering just enough to betray his youth. His frame was wiry, his movements restless, like a coiled spring that didn’t quite know which way it wanted to snap. His eyes darted along the shadows of the alley, scanning for threats, for exits, for everything except Arthur himself. He held a knife too, smaller, utilitarian, the sort of blade used for cutting ropes or bread more often than throats — though the night had ways of changing a man’s intent. His trembling grip gave him away, but his loyalty didn’t falter; even shaking, he stood close to Ulric's shoulder. Arthur recognized that kind of fear — the kind that didn’t paralyze, but propelled. It was the same kind that had once driven him when he was too young to understand the cost of survival.

The group stopped ten paces away, and for a moment, no one spoke. The rain ticked against the corrugated roofs above them, pooling at their feet in shallow ripples that reflected the faint light in fractured lines. Ulric stared at Arthur, saying nothing, letting the silence fill with its own kind of menace. It was a game of patience — and Arthur knew it. He didn’t break eye contact,

didn’t move a muscle beyond the faint tightening of his jaw. He had worked too long in this city’s shadows to show weakness in front of someone like Ulric Stoneborn. The boy might have been fifteen, but his name already carried weight in every den and dock across Doskvol. And here, in this alley where the walls leaned close and secrets clung like mold, Arthur could feel that power pressing against him like static before a storm.

When Ulric finally spoke, his voice was low, steady, and too calm for a boy who should have been shouting his way through life. “Xavier,” he said, each syllable a measured drop of water into the cold. “You came alone.” His tone carried the faintest edge of curiosity, not admiration — a test, plain and simple. Then, after a heartbeat’s pause, the corners of his mouth twitched into a half-smirk, the kind of expression that could belong to either a commander or a killer. “Brave,” he said, and his gaze flicked toward the pistol at Arthur’s side before rising back to meet his eyes, “or stupid?” The question hung between them, heavy with challenge, the faint echo of it carried down the alley like smoke.

Arthur exhaled slowly, the motion quiet but deliberate. He took in Ulric's words, the way the boy’s eyes glinted with that mixture of arrogance and calculation that only those raised in violence seemed to master. He almost smiled — not from amusement, but recognition. “That depends,” he said, his voice roughened by the chill and the weight of long nights spent awake. “On whether I’m meeting the Stoneborn, or just their ghosts.” He let the words land carefully, sharp enough to test the air, his gaze flicking past Boquinha, lingering just a moment on Cuzão, before returning to Ulric. He didn’t reach for his pistol. He didn’t need to. His calm was its own kind of weapon, one forged by years of walking into rooms just like this, surrounded by men and children who wanted to see what kind of blood ran through him.

Ulric's eyes narrowed, the faint smile never leaving his lips. The shadows clung tighter to him as though the alley itself was listening, waiting for what came next. “Careful, Xavier,” he murmured, stepping closer until the light barely touched the pale line of the scar at his temple. “Ghosts don’t bleed.” His breath clouded between them, mingling with Arthur’s, two currents of heat in the cold. For a moment, the city seemed to pause, holding its breath with them. In the distance, a bell tolled — maybe from the Espiritas tower, maybe just some factory clock striking the late hour. The sound trembled through the damp air, carrying with it the unspoken truth that in Doskvol, meetings like this never ended cleanly. Arthur felt the weight of it settle in his chest as his pulse steadied, his mind sharpening. Whatever Ulric wanted tonight, it wasn’t conversation.

“You have something I want.” I said it plain, voice a stone dropped into the alley’s hush, and Ulric answered like a stock reply he’d been practicing. “And you have something I’ll want eventually.” He smiled then—thin, sharp as a razored coin—and the alley seemed to listen harder. Boquinha stepped forward with that impossible smallness, hands tucked behind her back, grin never wavering as if it were glued on for effect. “We know what you’re here for. The twins,” she chirped, tilting her head like some curious bird picking at a scrap. “They’re safe. But nothing’s ever free, Mister Xavier. Even heroes have to pay.” I tasted the word heroes and filed it away; I was a leech and an engineer, not a savior. My jaw tightened around the truth. “I’m not a hero,” I said, low and even, and Ulric's eyes flicked over me like a man assessing the heat in coal.

“No,” he agreed, voice slow, like a match struck. “But you’re a Cypher. And right now, that’s worse.” He let the weight of the name rest in the air, letting it do the work of a blade while his smile stayed the same, a crooked promise. “You’ve made enemies, Arthur. Big ones. Friends too, I hear. The Crows are loud these days.” He said it without malice, more a fact of the street; the way he said it made me understand the ledger he kept in his head—credits and debts measured in danger. I didn’t bite. Boquinha’s bright face watched me, her smile a blade’s edge. “Silas already did his part to help you. You promised information on their location. Where are they?” I asked, the question stripped of patience. It was the part that mattered.

Boquinha’s answer came in that same syrup-innocent voice, crisp as a snapped twig. “I already told him. Deadlands wood. That’s where they are. Go fetch them.” She turned the simple sentence into a coin tossed into a river, light on the surface but sinking fast. I let the words sit, colder than they should have been, because Deadlands Wood is not a point on a map you hand to a stranger. “Deadlands Wood is a very large location,” I said, voice trimmed clean, “I will need something more exact than that. Point me to the right tree.” For a long breath we stared across the small distance—Ulric, Boquinha, Cuzão, me—each of us a different kind of stillness, each waiting for the other to show their hand or their teeth. The city breathed around us: the gutter’s drip, the distant groan of a barge, a dog’s bark, all the small, awful chorus of Doskvol.

Then Ulric cut the quiet like a wire. “Xavier,” he said, low and deliberate. “You brought it?” It wasn’t a question of politeness; it was a demand seasoned with the expectation that men like me kept our bargains like clockwork. I didn’t let the alley’s chill reach the old, steady place inside my chest—too many nights had taught me how to steady my hands. “I did.” I knelt slowly, letting my knees complain like old pumps, and unwrapped the satchel with the showmanship of a man who understood how relics carry rumor. Inside, resting in felt and oil, was a palm-sized brass contraption shaped like a feathered biplane—sleek, fragile, and humming faintly as if it had a pulse that matched the city’s. Lannic’s handwriting lived in its joints.

Ulric crouched beside it, curiosity softening his hard lines until he looked older, almost human under the soot. He reached out with a cautious reverence and I watched the way his fingers moved—this was a boy who’d learned how to worship things that could hurt him. “So the stories were true. Lannic Morrow—the Toy Maker,” he breathed, and there was admiration in it that required no permission to be real. Boquinha leaned in, small frame taut as a wire, and her smile deepened into something that might have been hunger. “It’s adorable,” she said, the word slippery. “Like a little metal bird. But I’m guessing it doesn’t just flutter.” Her voice held a hundred tiny knives.

I let the device show what it could; there was no poetry in the truth. “Controlled flight within half a block,” I said, calming the room with the machine’s plain facts. “Wired for a small explosive charge. Not a lot of payload, but fast, quiet. If you get twenty of these, you can tear through a convoy without ever stepping out of cover.” The alley narrowed to the brass plane’s hum, and for a second I could imagine them—little birds lifting like a swarm and then a poor convoy folding like paper. Ulric's eyes gleamed, complex and immediate. Boquinha’s smile sharpened. Cuzão’s fingers tightened on his knife until the muscles in his forearm stood out like cords. The exchange had the gravity of an agreement and the jeopardy of a powder keg. We stood there, each of us calculating cost, gain, and the weight of a promise that could blow a dozen lives into the gutters if mislaid.

“What else is there?” Ulric asked, voice low and even, though the curiosity behind it was naked as flame. The boy had a way of asking questions that sounded like commands, his words walking the thin line between invitation and order. I reached into the satchel again, my gloves whispering against the canvas, and drew out the short metal rod no longer than a forearm, capped at either end with cut gems that caught what little lantern-glow bled from the street. It gleamed like something half-sacred, half-dangerous. With a sharp motion, I struck the rod against the cobblestones. The crack of gem against stone echoed faintly, brittle and hollow, a sound that didn’t belong in the living dark. One end splintered under the impact with a dull fracture, leaving the other gem whole and trembling with a faint pulse. My breath hitched before I let it go. The surviving gem flickered once, and then again—soft at first, blue light licking its edges, then brighter, strobing like the throb of a heart caught in panic. The alley came alive with those pulses, shadows jerking and leaping with every beat.

“These are one-use only,” I said, forcing my tone to stay steady even as the light spilled across our faces. “They don’t shine long. But when they shine, it means magic is near.” The pulse

quickened, flashes stuttering faster and faster until they blurred into what might as well have been a steady glow. My reflection in Ulric's eyes was caught between blue light and dark. “You can use it to detect possible magical traps… or artefacts,” I finished, letting the word hang like the smoke between us. Boquinha leaned closer, the flickering glow painting her features ghost-pale, fascinated, her grin gone slack in awe for the first time. Ulric said nothing, but I saw the slight movement of his hand, two fingers brushing the dagger at his side as if he expected the glow to name something living. I didn’t speak again. The faster that rhythm beat, the more certain I became: whatever it was detecting, it wasn’t faint, and it wasn’t distant. Magic was near—very near. It could’ve been one of them, or something they carried. It didn’t matter. Curiosity in this city had teeth.

When the light began to fade, I slipped the rod back into my coat and reached for another tool, smaller, quieter, less temperamental. I drew out a small golden sphere, the size of a tennis ball, its brass body etched with fine lines that caught the dying glow. I pressed a hidden panel and felt the mechanism hum beneath my thumb. With a click and a whir, the sphere unfolded—thin metal limbs unfolding from its shell, tiny legs snapping into place until it looked like a spider made of gold and gears. It crawled over my glove, alive but tethered, mechanical but somehow aware. It never left my hand. “I call these Crawlies,” I said, watching its eyes flicker to life in the dark. “They’re spider-like mechanical scouts. Small and quick. This one’s calibrated to seek my enemies.” I adjusted a dial on its back and it chirred, sharp and obedient. “I can calibrate them for whoever you want, if you like what you see. Add an explosive charge, and it becomes a seeking mine. Use your imagination, and you can fill it with worse.”

I held the little machine out toward Boquinha, and she took it without hesitation. It crawled up her wrist, then settled in her palm, clinging delicately to her sleeve as she tilted her head to study it. Her smile returned, this time genuine and startlingly warm, as if she were holding something precious rather than deadly. She laughed—soft and delighted—and for a moment it didn’t sound like an Stoneborn’s laugh at all, but like a child in a market square seeing her first Emberwing. “It’s beautiful,” she murmured. The spider’s legs flexed and gleamed. Ulric watched her, and for a heartbeat something like pride flickered behind his eyes, that rare expression of a leader seeing his people understand the worth of the world he built. But then his face hardened again, the warmth replaced by calculation.

He straightened, drawing himself taller, that deceptive fifteen-year-old posture that made him look twenty and carved from smoke and bone. His eyes met mine, sharp, storm-blue and unyielding. “I like it all,” he said, and the words came out steady as gunfire. “Very much. That’ll be the price.” The echo of his declaration lingered in the damp air, mixing with the faint hiss of the rod’s dying light. My brow furrowed, the first crack in my calm. “You want all of them?” I asked. He nodded once. “Yes. Delivered,” he confirmed. “Built to spec. And one more thing—your guarantee that Lannic himself made them.”

The name hung in the air like an oath. Boquinha’s smile faltered, curiosity spiking again, and Cuzão shifted his weight, eyes flicking from Ulric to me as if gauging how serious that condition was. Ulric went on, each word precise. “I want his craftsmanship. No half-measures, no substitutions. I’ve heard the stories, seen what his toys can do. I want to know my enemies will never see me coming—and if they do, they won’t live to tell anyone about it.” His voice was calm, almost too calm, the calm of a boy who’d been forced to become his own god of war. I let a breath escape through my teeth, slow and controlled, the kind a man takes when measuring distance to an edge. “That’s a heavy price,” I said finally, my tone like the scrape of metal on stone.

The alley fell still again, the glow of the broken gem dimming to a ghost-light near our boots. Ulric's shadow lengthened against the wall, haloed faintly by the last of the blue flicker, and for an instant, I saw not a boy but a sovereign of something dangerous and rising. He tilted his chin

upward, that half-smirk curving back into place. “Everything worth having is,” he said. The way he said it made my gut twist—not out of fear, but recognition. It was the same tone I’d heard from Lannic when he first handed me a machine that could kill a man without leaving a mark. The same tone that came from every genius or tyrant who believed they could outthink the cost. The air in Ashvale pressed tighter, the smell of coal and rain mixing into something sharp. Somewhere deep in the alleys, a bell rang once, hollow and far. I didn’t move, not yet. The weight of the bargain was still settling between us.

“I expect you to say yes because otherwise you’ll spend the rest of your days wondering if those boys are still breathing,” Ulric replied. The words hung between us like a damp shroud, sharp and practical and utterly without pretense; I could feel them settle in my chest like cold iron, and for a moment the alley’s smell of coal and old blood seemed to thicken around my ears. “I know you, Xavier. You can’t live with that kind of doubt. And I won’t lie—they’re good kids. Deserve a better end than their father got.” The boy’s voice carried no mawkishness—only the blunt arithmetic of a leader who measures charity by survival—and when he said “their father” the name he didn’t speak tasted in my mouth like ash; Adrian’s face rose, soft and torn, behind my eyelids and I kept my jaw from clenching hard enough to split. There was a pause, thick as the city smog, and in it I weighed temperature against duty and found duty hotter still; Boquinha tilted her head, watching him with those bright, unfair eyes, the way a bird inclines itself toward a stranger who might feed it. “So’s a child’s life. Two, actually. Cute little boys, twins. Wouldn’t want anything bad to happen while you... stall.” Her voice was syrup and steel, the smile in it like a blade behind a ribbon, and my hands went still even as the knot of obligation tightened in my gut. Arthur’s fists clenched at his sides, but he nodded. “Fine. You’ll have your toys. But I want the location. Now.”

Ulric's smile was thin and cold and pleased all at once, a thing without teeth and yet still capable of tearing. “It’s called The Whispering Grove. The twins are alive, in the care of Jackie Comber. Hidden well. And trust me, no one gets near his sanctum unless he allows it. I will let him know that one of you will attempt to approach. Just walk into the Deadland Woods and follow your nose. The Unseen approach you, you never approach them.” The cadence of his words was casual cruelty—information given as though naming a street corner—and I felt the map in my head redraw itself with a leaded finger: Deadlands, Whispering Grove, Jackie Comber, sanctuary and sanctum both, and a warning dressed up as guidance. Arthur gave a curt nod. “I’ll go after them, bring them to where they belong. Make sure they’re safe myself.” The promise left my mouth like a thing oiled and used, practical and liable to snap; I didn’t let the tremor of worry show because there was work to be done and people who could not afford my hesitation. As I turned to leave, Ulric called after me, “One more thing. You’re poking at Valesque, right? Looking for that guy who bleeds mud?” The question landed with the cheap weight of someone who knows the city’s gossip better than its trusts, and I froze a breath, the alley bending in around the sudden brightness of that name.

I didn’t answer, but the stillness in my stance was confirmation enough. How did this boy know of my investigation, the private thread of Merrow Valesque and the mud-man whisper? Ulric seemed to read my mind, because he smiled and said, “Don’t worry, a little bird told my future. The Unseen see quite a lot. That’s how I know this information. Watch for the Smiling One,” his voice lowering to something like contrition and menace braided together. “Don’t trust his face. Don’t trust his voice. He’s not what he seems.” The warning felt less like pleasantry and more like a relic tossed into the dark—a talisman made of rumor and menace—and yet it stung because everywhere I turned these days, stories had sharp edges. Arthur turned, eyes narrowed. “What is he?” The question slipped out of me more like an admission than interrogation; Ulric's eyes gleamed, small and private, and the alley seemed to lean in to listen for what a kid-king might call the boogeyman.

For the first time in that meeting, Cuzão spoke up, his voice thinner than a scraped wire but carrying with it the city's small horrors. "He is the boogeyman. A story to scare the little kids. A man who can change his shape, steal you in the night. He doesn't bleed blood, but mud. He shapeshifts..." He stopped as if the air itself had told him to shut his mouth; fear can be like a blade that cuts the tongue too. Boquinha's smile widened, the expression folding into something both delighted and sure, and she chimed in with a perfunctory flourish of theatrical whispering—"Something that wears human skin like a party mask. And you know what they say—if he starts laughing, it's already too late." Her tone was half-child, half-eulogy; the sort of thing you tell yourself to keep from looking outside after dark. Ulric cut them both off with the efficiency of a man used to decisions and told me plainly, "I will contact one of you again. Tell you the location I want these stuff delivered. It was good to make business with you, Arthur of the Cyphers." The words were formal, almost ceremonial, and they closed the trade like a stamp on a sealed letter.

No more words passed. The Stoneborn disappeared into the mist as if they had been a dream the city was trying to unremember. Boquinha gave a graceful little curtsy—ridiculous and deadly all at once—and Cuzão lingered for just a second to offer me a look that might have been concern, or pity, or the warning of someone who has seen pirates and saints and can't tell which is worse. The silence after they left was the kind that carries sound for a long time, so I let it hold me while I listened to my own breath and the tiny clatter of the golden spider still folded like a secret in the satchel at my feet. The gem-rod's last blue ghost winked out somewhere in the dark as if some small lantern died in my coat, and the city went back to being itself—damp, small, and full of work that had to be done by hands that did not sleep. I moved slow, checking my pockets, feeling the weight of obligations folded in brass and promise, and I thought of Adrian's boys—Luis and Nico—small things whose names now carried the gravity of an oath. The alley swallowed my steps and spat them out onto Ashvale's main: lamps guttering, a market closed, the river's breath like a beast in its sleep.

As I walked away, the words Ulric had left me with kept crawling under my skin—"watch for the Smiling One." The image it conjured was wrong in every comfortable way: a laughing face on a man who bled mud, something that stole and shifted and wore people like coats. It dovetailed too neatly with Merrow's mud and the rotten puppetry he's been spreading; the investigation board in my workshop hummed in my head with its diagrams and names and thin red threads, and for the first time in a long time I felt the edges of my world slip toward a map I did not like. I pocketed the rod, the crawlies, the little plane prototype's schematic in my mind as if tucking children under a cloak, and the bargain we'd made echoed in the hollow of my ribs. I had a delivery to build and a forest to enter and a warning to heed that tasted of nursery rhymes and graveyards, and none of it would wait while I mourned. The city breathed around me; somewhere, iron and flame and laughter made a promise about what came next.

The Cypher hideout smelled of hot brass and used oil, a metallic tang that sat under the hum like a second heartbeat, and the bunker itself thrummed with the patient, insectile noise of machines alive in the dark — regulators sighing, coils ticking, the distant whisper of the cooling array like a small, constant wind. Lannic's workbench threw a pool of yellow light over blueprints pinned like prayer flags to the wall, lines and annotations scratched in a cipher only half the room understood; it felt less like a workshop and more like a cathedral for men who worshipped logic. I set the satchel down with more ceremony than the thing deserved, its small brass body chiming faintly as the golden spider shifted inside, and both Lannic and Silas turned to me with faces that never learned to look surprised anymore. "They're well, at least he says so," I told them, keeping my voice level because the night had left my hands wired and the last thing I needed was the room leaning in on me. "With Jackie Comber. Safe for now. But I had to pay for it." The words landed like small weights on the table; both men heard the price in the quiet after

they came out. Lannic's eyebrows climbed, a single, sharp arch that meant calculation before opinion. "What'd he ask for?" he asked, already guessing some of it because he'd taught me to read the city like circuits.

I unpacked the rest slowly, letting the light show the toys as if they were relics meant to be revered or arrested, and the crawlies blinked once, then folded like sleeping things, the rod's gem still ghosting a blue pulse beneath the cloth. "Everything," I said, each syllable smooth and obedient to the ledger in my chest. "The crawlies, the rod, the flappers. And it has to be built by your hands, Lannic." Lannic scoffed, a short, disgusted sound that meant both pride and annoyance; he ran a hand through hair that stuck up like wire under a coil. "Of course he wants toys. Damn it. I should've let that nickname die years ago." The joke landed like a shard of metal, and for a second we all allowed the room to breathe on something other than consequence. Silas, who sat on a low crate with his coat bunched around his knees and that crow-sense of his still in the way he held himself, said quietly, "If it gets us closer to the twins... it's worth it." His voice was flat but not hollow; it had an edge of steadiness that made the words an order to my chest as much as a plea.

"After this mission, I'm going to the Deadlands to get them. Where is the hideout, Arthur? I'm bringing them home." His certainty was the kind you either matched or died for, and for a moment the room seemed to turn on that single note. I repeated the instructions Ulric had given me, careful to keep the cadence even because instructions like that lived and died in detail. "Ulric said to walk into the Deadland Woods. Their location is protected somehow. We don't seek the Unseen; they find us, or so Ulric told me. They are expecting one of us." Lannic stepped forward then, the lines in his face deepening as if his mind were translating the phrase "Unseen" into a dozen schematics. "And what about this Smiling One again? You believe what Ulric said?" he asked, and the question was both blunt and dangerous, because saying a name aloud gives it weight. My jaw set like a vice. "It's a story to scare little kids, Lannic. Doesn't matter. If he's real... I'll find him. And I'll wipe the smile off his face." The promise tasted like iron, the kind you swallow before you throw a punch.

Lannic was thoughtful for a beat, the kind of pause that meant he weighed probabilities like coins rather than feelings. He moved to the rack and pulled free a sheet of heavy paper, corners worn, the ink still oily with recent use; his fingers left smudges where truth had been handled too often. He handed it to me without preamble. "Be careful, Arthur," he said, voice low, the words soft enough to be private even in the loud hum of the machines. "Doskvol's legends are just history with blood still drying." The caveat hung between us like a warning flare. The paper was the meeting I'd asked him to arrange — names, times, a room in a tavern that smelled of stale ale and bargaining — and the way his thumb pressed the corner suggested he'd already run the plan through his mind twice and still worried about the loose ends. I picked up the paper and felt the weight of a dozen small possibilities shifting under my fingers; the letters on the page meant people who moved in the dark but wanted something bright enough to risk daylight for.

Lannic kept talking while I folded the paper into my coat and tried to make the room's hummed light steady under my ribs; he leaned on the bench, fingers splayed over a map that looked like it had been slept on and fed to a machine, and when he spoke his voice had that particular rasp that meant he'd chewed through the numbers more than once. "I paid good coin for this," he said, and the words were a small confession that smelled like oil and regret; he tapped a spot on the map with a knuckle that left a dark smudge. "There's a man who knows about the Espiritas carriage that moved Merrow—saw the loading, remembers faces, routes, even the way the driver limped when he stood too long." He named no one at first, which is how men whet you on the hook before they drop the line, and I watched him measure my patience against his need to be precise. He rubbed his thumb along the edge of the paper and then, almost like a joke that had to be true, he said, "Name's Viero." The sound of it fell into the air like a stone; both of us felt it settle with a weight we hadn't expected because neither of us had

heard that name before and in Doskvol unknown names are either ghosts or traps. “You never heard of him,” Lannic added, looking at me with a look that married triumph and worry; he’d taken more risks than I liked on this one, scraped together coin from pockets I’d rather not count. “I bribed the right men, slipped the correct hands, and he spit up a ledger of when and where Merrow moved through the city. It cost a fortune in favors and coin and a favor from a favor, Arthur. Don’t treat it like spare change.”

I let the gravity of that sink in while the golden spider sat folded in the satchel like an obedient animal, and when I pushed the satchel closer to the lamp its brass reflected the ceiling’s low light and made little patterns on the table. Lannic’s fingers drummed once, twice, then he reached under the bench and pulled out a bundle tied with a strip of oilcloth, the kind of package that smells faintly of starch and fresh cloth and the bureau’s secret hand. He peeled it back and held up clothing that looked like it belonged to a man who wanted to be invisible in plain sight: a coarse gray coat, a hat with a wide, unremarkable brim, boots scuffed into decent anonymity, and a scarf borrowed from someone who’d never been noticed. “You won’t wear Cypher colors,” Lannic said, blunt and with no room for argument. “You’ll be the Watchman. He answers the Watchman.” The way he said it made the name feel like a talisman he’d spent coin to polish, and I knew then that he’d built more than a meeting; he’d built a mask for me to sleep in for one night and then burn when it had done its work. “They can’t suspect a Cypher,” he added, voice low enough the bunker probably kept it, the point sharpened like a blade; “not with Merrow’s men looking for signs, not with the Unseen watching for any face that thinks too carefully.”

I tried the coat on then, because a man has to know how a lie will sit on his shoulders before he walks into it, and the fabric hugged wrong and honest in ways that made me feel foreign to myself. Lannic adjusted the brim of the hat like an artisan setting a stone, his hands careful, reverent even, and he looked up with the kind of weary smile that says he wishes he hadn’t had to spend this much but is glad he did. “Viero will only talk to the Watchman,” he repeated, ensuring I’d understand the smallest rule that might save the largest part of us. “He’s old, and old men like names that promise order — the Watchman promises order. He hates spectacle, so be dull. Dull men don’t trouble the world.” I felt the oddness of that philosophy settle around my neck like the scarf he’d wrapped for me; being dull wasn’t in my trade, but when dull is armor you wear it like any other shield. “He’ll meet you at the old bellhouse off Wren’s Lane,” Lannic said, and pushed the map so my finger could find the place; “midnight, not earlier, and he won’t come inside. He’s careful in his old ways. Bring coin, bring the right name—no more, no less—and if he asks who you serve, tell him you keep the city’s watches.” There was a kind of theater in his directions that made my chest tighten: men who trade in secrets love nothing more than a good costume.

Silas, who had been quiet while we talked like someone letting an idea warm before committing to it, leaned forward and said, “If Viero’s got what Lannic bought, it’s worth dying for—maybe not literal, but the sort of information that pulls shoals of trouble to the surface.” His voice was calm but the eyes that held the room said he’d drown if it meant the twins got a chance at a life that wasn’t a string of tragedies. “You’ll go as the Watchman, not Arthur Xavier. You’ll answer the name, you’ll keep your hands out of your pockets unless you mean to show a coin, and you’ll never, ever say Cypher in a tavern.” The list came like the parts of a prayer, spare and iron-forged, and I nodded because half the time plans are promises and you can’t unmake a promise without cutting the hand that offered it. Lannic added practical nuisances to the list — change of gait, no reflective bits, gloves that look like they came from a stonemason rather than a tinkerer, small habits to die away for a night — and I felt the weight of it all settle into my shoulders like the coat. “You’ll have a pouch,” he said, handing over a small leather satchel that contained more than empty coin; inside was a led ticket, a seal, and a folded scrap with a phrase I was to utter if things went wrong. It was theater and contingency rolled into one.

The bunker’s hum wrapped us as I put the hat on and felt the stranger’s shape fit tight, the brim shadowing my eyes in a way that made me feel younger and all at once very practiced. Lannic watched me adjust the scarf, lips pulled thin, like a man who’d sewn too many seams by midnight and still hadn’t slept enough to know if they’d hold. “We spent more than we should’ve,” he said finally, and the sentence held both apology and a ledger-balanced fact; the money left a scent in the room, the cost of information and a coat and a story, and I could taste it like iron in my mouth. “But we needed Viero,” he finished, and in the small press of the bunker that was conviction.

The fog rolled off the docks in heavy waves, swallowing the crooked lamp posts and casting a muffled pall over the tangle of market stalls and alleyways near Ink Lane. The lanterns flickered in the salt-choked air, giving everything the look of a fever dream—half real, half remembered. Arthur Xavier stood still among the shadows, the black scarf across his lower face hiding his features beneath a hooded oilskin coat. Tonight, he wasn’t Arthur. He was The Watchman, a name traded in whispers between fences, smugglers, and ghosts who dealt in the currency of secrets. His gloved fingers rolled a small brass token between them, the faint tap of metal against his palm keeping rhythm with the slow drip of water from the eaves. The air smelled of salt and coal and something faintly metallic, like a blade just pulled from the forge. He wasn’t alone for long.

From the haze, Viero emerged—a shape before a man, tall and angular, face concealed behind a porcelain mask shaped like the long beak of a seabird. His hands, gloved and still, hung at his sides with a kind of deliberate control that didn’t belong to normal flesh. When he finally moved, it was too smooth, too measured, like a puppet pulled along by invisible strings. His voice, when it came, was polite but hollow, an imitation of warmth. “Watchman,” he greeted, his head bowing just slightly. “Or do you prefer the other name tonight? You carry so many, after all.”

Arthur’s voice came steady, low enough to be mistaken for a growl. “I carry what the job requires. Let’s not waste time.” He took a step forward, his boots sinking into the shallow puddles that glimmered faintly under the flickering light. “You worked with the Espiritas. The carriage that moved Merrow Valesque out on the night of the Circle’s citywide attack—you were the one who set it up.” His tone sharpened like the edge of drawn steel. “I want the name of the driver. The man behind the wheel.”

Viero’s head tilted, the movement unnatural in its precision. “So that’s what you came for,” he said softly, his tone amused, though the mask robbed it of humanity. “You’re chasing ghosts again, Watchman. Some doors are locked for a reason.” Arthur didn’t move, didn’t blink. “I’ve spent my life picking locks.” The other man chuckled, a sound that rang sharp and thin in the fog. “Ah, but this one doesn’t open with keys. The driver you seek wasn’t… quite a man.” He traced a finger along the rusted edge of a fish stall, the scraping sound small and strange in the quiet. “He bled, yes, but not like you or I. His blood ran thick. Dark. Not red.” His head turned slightly, the porcelain catching the lantern’s light. “More like mud.” Arthur’s jaw tensed beneath the scarf. The words hung there, heavy as chains. “You’re saying the driver—” “—wasn’t himself,” Viero interrupted smoothly. “Or rather, wasn’t *anyone* at all. He was borrowed.” Arthur took a slow step closer. “Borrowed by who?” For a moment, the mask stayed perfectly still, then the faintest curve shaped the corners of Viero’s lips beneath it, not a smile but an imitation of one. “They call him the Smiling One.”

Arthur didn’t answer, but his pulse quickened. Viero leaned forward, voice lowering as if confiding in him. “He’s the one who drives men into ruin. Wears their faces for a night, takes their voices for a stroll, and when he’s done—he leaves them somewhere wet, hollowed out. The Espiritas officer you’re chasing wasn’t loyal to anyone that night. He was just a shell.” He let the last word linger like the echo of a confession, then straightened, the sound of his boots soft against the wet ground. “So, you see, Watchman… your driver’s gone. And the one who took

his skin?" A pause—just long enough for the lantern to sputter out between them. "He's still smiling." The fog thickened, swallowing Viero's figure as if the air itself decided to take him back. Arthur didn't move. His hand brushed the pistol at his side, more out of habit than intent. Somewhere beneath the scarf, his breath came slow, controlled—but his thoughts burned. The whispers were real, the stories about the man who bled mud and changed shape like a nightmare made flesh. The Smiling One wasn't just a myth the children feared; he was out there, and Merrow had used him.

Arthur's grip on the pistol beneath his coat tightened until the leather of his glove creaked under the strain. His voice came low, cold, the words sharp enough to cut through the fog between them. "Merrow Valesque," he said. "Is he the Smiling One?" For the first time, something cracked in Viero's composure. The porcelain mask tilted ever so slightly, and when he spoke again, the smooth detachment was gone—replaced by a tone brittle and edged with something like fear. "No," he said sharply. "Merrow is a rumor—a breath caught in the throat of this city. The Smiling One…" He hesitated, the fog curling around him as if to swallow the words before they could escape. "…he's everyone's mistake."

The air between them grew taut, stretched thin as wire. The docks groaned under the weight of the tide, a low metallic moan carrying from the boats moored in the dark. Arthur took a slow, deliberate step forward, his voice steady but coiled tight. "You think speaking in riddles will protect you?" Viero's body shifted backward, the mask gleaming faintly in the lantern light. "I think," he said softly, "that I've already said too much. But you—" the tone changed, tilting toward curiosity now, almost playful—"you haven't said enough. Who are you really, Watchman?"

Arthur's hand twitched toward his weapon, but before he could answer, the flash of movement came—a blur of silver and shadow. Viero's hand snapped toward his belt. Arthur moved on instinct. The pistol cleared his coat, the sound of the shot cracking through the night like a whip. The bullet struck the side of Viero's head point-blank. The porcelain shattered in a spray of pale shards. But there was no blood. No collapse. The figure jerked upright, spasming once like a marionette yanked by an unseen string. Then, impossibly fast, Viero lunged.

Arthur barely managed to duck the first strike—a backhanded swing from Viero's gloved fist that glanced off his shoulder, hard enough to twist him half-around. The second hit came faster—a knee driven into Arthur's ribs that forced the breath out of him in a guttural grunt. Pain exploded through his side, the air thick with salt and iron. He stumbled but held his ground, snarling, and brought the pistol up for another shot. Viero caught his wrist, their struggle a blur of shadow and gaslight—boots slipping in the puddles, the echo of breath and grit and strain filling the narrow lane.

Arthur slammed his head forward, connecting with Viero's mask in a hollow crack that would've broken bone if there'd been any to break. The blow staggered the masked figure, sending him reeling a step back. Arthur raised his gun again, but Viero's arm lashed out, catching the barrel and twisting with a strength that felt mechanical, inhuman. The weapon skittered away across the slick stones. Then, with a swift motion that felt almost rehearsed, Viero shoved him backward into a stack of crates. Wood splintered under the impact.

Arthur pushed off the wreckage, teeth bared, but by the time he straightened, Viero was already retreating into the fog. His voice floated back, warped by distance and the rolling mist—mocking, singsong, too calm for a man who should've been bleeding. "That's enough for tonight, Watchman," he called. "Consider this a message. Stay vigilant. The real show is about to begin." His laugh followed, thin and hollow, vanishing into the dark as his figure dissolved into the haze.

Arthur didn’t think. He bolted after him, boots pounding against wet cobblestone, heart slamming in rhythm with the echo of pursuit. The fog distorted everything—lamp light twisted into halos, shadows stretched too long. Viero’s movements weren’t human. He moved like something unstitched from its own body, gliding rather than running, slipping through narrow spaces as if the air itself parted for him. Arthur cursed under his breath, vaulting over a stack of barrels, the pistol now somewhere lost behind him. The smell of salt and iron filled his nose. Somewhere ahead, something metallic crashed, then silence.

He slowed only when the echo of footsteps vanished completely. The fog had thickened into a wall, and the only sound was his own ragged breathing. Then he saw it—a glint at his feet. Arthur crouched, fingers brushing against cold metal. A pocket watch. Old, cracked, the glass face shattered, its hands frozen at **11:59**. He flipped it open. Inside, a scrap of parchment had been pinned through the inner lining with a toothpick, the paper rough and soaked at the edges. Scrawled across it in looping black ink were the words: *“You ask too many questions, Lannic.”*

Arthur stared at it, his pulse thudding once, hard. Beneath the words, drawn in ink that had smeared but not faded, was a crude seal—just a grin, wide and jagged, stretching too far across the page. He slipped the note into his coat pocket and straightened, the fog curling around his boots like smoke. The night felt wrong now, heavier. He replayed the moment in his mind—the shot, the sound of impact, the way Viero’s head had twisted and yet he’d stayed standing. No human could have survived that.

Arthur turned toward the water, watching as the mist rolled back in, reclaiming the dockside like a curtain closing on a stage. His breath came slow, steady, but his thoughts wouldn’t settle. Something had just shifted in Doskvol’s underbelly. Whoever the Smiling One truly was—he wasn’t a man anymore. The way Viero had spoken, the riddles, the imitation of voice and movement—it all fit too neatly with the whispers Arthur had heard in passing. A shapeshifter. A mimic. A thing that wore faces like clothing. Merrow’s creature. The laughter of the Royal Family echoing through the bones of the city once more.

He stood there, the cracked watch heavy in his palm, the frozen time gleaming faintly under the half-dead lanterns. *11:59.* One minute to midnight. One minute before it all burns.

Chapter 09: **Barrowcleft**

It had started to rain by the time Arthur made it back. The storm outside was thick with soot and salt, the kind that smeared the glass in gray streaks and filled the city's gutters with black froth. He stepped into the Tech Emporium, brushing the rain and grime from his coat, his boots echoing sharp against the copper-plated floors. The humming of generators and the hiss of pressurized steam made the walls feel alive, every pipe and valve twitching like veins under the city's skin. The smell of solder and ozone filled the air, heavy and bitter, the kind of scent that clung to your clothes and refused to leave. Lannic Morrow stood over a half-assembled glider on the workbench, goggles perched on his brow, sleeves rolled past his elbows, fingers stained with ink and oil. Sparks hissed where his torch had just cooled, the faint blue halo fading into shadow. When he looked up, surprise flickered briefly across his face, like a match struck in wind. "You're back early," he said, voice taut with equal parts curiosity and calculation. "Didn't think I'd see you before dawn."

Arthur didn't answer right away. He crossed the room in silence, his steps slow and deliberate, the kind of walk that carried weight rather than haste. The storm's noise pressed against the metal walls, thunder rumbling like distant machinery turning somewhere deep beneath the city. "Where's Silas?" Arthur asked at last, his voice low, worn thin by cold and thought. Lannic set his wrench down with a small metallic tap, leaning against the bench, his brow furrowed. "Gone," he said simply. "Left an hour ago. Said he was getting ready to check on the boys." He paused, the brief shadow of concern crossing his tone. "Didn't tell me much else. Just that he'd be gone for a while." Arthur nodded, jaw tightening as he moved toward the nearest chair, the motion slow but heavy with exhaustion. He sat down, the leather creaking under his weight, and for a moment the only sound was the distant hum of the glider's coils cooling in the air.

From his coat pocket, Arthur slid something across the worktable toward Lannic—a small, deliberate movement that made the older man still mid-breath. A pocket watch. Old, cracked, its glass face shattered and the hands frozen at 11:59. The brass casing was tarnished to near-black, edges chipped, the metal cold from the rain. Lannic hesitated before touching it, his ink-stained fingers hovering above the relic like it might burn him. Arthur flipped it open with a quiet click. Inside, a scrap of parchment was pinned through the lining with a toothpick, rough paper soaked at the corners, its ink still glistening faintly under the light. Scrawled across it in looping black letters were the words: *You ask too many questions, Lannic.* The words cut sharper than any knife could. Lannic's expression hardened instantly, his throat working as he swallowed down whatever curse wanted to come out first. His eyes lifted, meeting Arthur's through the shadow of the lamplight. "Where did you get this?" he asked, voice lower now, stripped of its usual sharp edge.

Arthur leaned forward, elbows braced on his knees, his gloved hands clasped loosely in front of him. Rain dripped faintly from the ends of his coat, pooling at his boots, the rhythm slow and steady. "From your informant," he said finally, his tone quiet but hard enough to crack glass. "Or what was left of him." The way he said *left* made the room colder, the hum of machinery dimming into something close to silence. "Your money was taken, Lannic—but it wasn't payment." He paused, watching the faint twitch in Lannic's jaw, the realization settling like lead. "It was bait. You didn't buy information." Arthur's voice dropped lower, a dark rasp now. "You paid for a message."

The two men stared at each other across the table, the watch lying between them like a dead heart still waiting to beat. The lamps hummed, shadows warping across the brass walls, the storm outside striking the window in long, angry streaks. For a moment, neither spoke. Arthur's gloved hand flexed once, slow, deliberate. Lannic exhaled through his nose, his fingers finally closing around the broken watch, the sound of the hinge creaking under his grip. The clock's frozen hands gleamed faintly under the flicker of light—one minute to midnight, one heartbeat before everything falls apart. The silence between them grew thick enough to choke on, the kind that promised the next words spoken would change everything. Then Arthur said nothing more, only met Lannic's gaze with a look that meant the same thing as a loaded gun. The city outside roared, thunder echoing through the pipes, and somewhere in the darkness between lightning strikes, the message waited to be understood.

Arthur's voice broke the hum of the machinery, low and steady, the sound of a man forcing control over something that still clawed at the back of his mind. "He called himself Viero," he began, eyes fixed on the floor as though replaying the steps in his head. "Tall. Too tall. Moved like something half alive. Wore a porcelain mask shaped like a bird's beak. I thought he was an informant—someone who could tell us about the Espiritas officer that drove Merrow out the night of the attack." He paused, his hand absently rubbing at the ache in his ribs where Viero's blows had landed. "But he wasn't a man. Not really. I shot him point-blank, Lannic. Shattered the mask. He didn't fall. No blood. Just… mud." The word came out like a curse. "Then he hit me twice, hard enough to leave bruises through the coat, and disappeared into the fog like smoke. Left this behind." He nodded toward the watch still sitting on the workbench, its cracked face catching the lamplight. "Said something about a show that's about to begin."

Lannic listened without interruption, his hands still, the habitual tinkering stilled for once. His goggles hung forgotten around his neck, lenses catching the light like tired eyes. The rain thudded against the roof, filling the pauses between Arthur's words like the slow turning of gears. When Arthur finished, the silence stretched, heavy as lead. Lannic finally moved, exhaling through his teeth and dragging a hand through his hair, leaving a dark streak of oil in the gray. "Doskvol used to make sense," he muttered, almost to himself. "You had your thieves, your ghosts, your machines that broke down more often than they worked. But now—hell, now it feels like the stories are walking out of the orphanages and into the streets." He looked at Arthur, the corners of his eyes drawn with fatigue that wasn't just from lack of sleep. "Legends aren't supposed to bleed. Or whatever that thing did." His voice was thin, quiet, and it carried the tremor of realization that the city's nightmares were no longer content to stay imaginary.

Arthur leaned back in his chair, the leather creaking faintly under the shift of his weight, and studied the faint reflection of the lamplight in the broken glass of the watch. "When I was a boy," he said, choosing his words carefully, "we used to tell stories too. About the Smiling One. A man who took faces, who came for those who lied or broke promises. Just stories to keep kids from wandering out after dark." His tone was clipped, almost clinical, but the edge of something softer threaded through it—an old echo of fear that had learned to live quietly. Lannic's eyes flicked up at that, something familiar crossing his face. "We told the same stories," he said, a faint, humorless smile ghosting across his mouth. "When I was little. Back in the Iron Den orphanage, before it all went to hell. Every kid in that place knew the Smiling One. Some swore they saw him. Tall shadow near the dormitory window, teeth white in the dark. We'd laugh about it in the morning."

He paused, his gaze drifting somewhere past Arthur, into the memory that had started to uncoil on its own. “But one night, a boy went missing. And then another, a few months later. No bodies, no screams. Just gone.” The words were quiet, but they hit the air with weight. “The sisters said they’d run away, but none of us believed that. We were too poor to run, too scared to even dream of leaving. And after that, they closed the orphanage. Said it was too dangerous, too cursed. We all grew up and called it superstition.” His hands found something small on the table to hold, a screw, a gear, anything to keep from letting the tremor in his fingers show. “Funny how superstition keeps catching up, isn’t it?”

Arthur said nothing for a long time. The storm outside pressed harder, thunder rolling over the rooftops like an iron drum. He watched Lannic in silence, the way the man’s eyes had gone distant, unfocused, seeing something far away and long buried. The smell of oil and wet brass hung heavy in the air, grounding them in the present even as the ghosts of their pasts brushed by. Finally, Arthur spoke, voice low but certain. “If legends are becoming truth, then it means someone’s making them real. Someone wants this city to choke on its own stories.” He reached forward, turning the pocket watch once between his fingers. “We find where the lie started, we find whoever’s feeding it.”

Lannic’s jaw tensed, the worry no longer subtle now. He leaned closer to the table, voice lowering until it nearly broke under its own fear. “If Merrow’s found a way to make the city’s monsters his soldiers… if he’s recruiting the things we used to whisper about—then this isn’t a turf war anymore. It’s something worse.” His eyes flicked toward the rain-streaked window, the glow of the streetlights outside wavering in the storm like ghost-lanterns. “We can’t fight phantoms, Arthur. Not if he’s turning myths into weapons.”

Arthur’s shoulders shifted, the faintest tremor passing through them as he looked away, jaw tightening beneath the weight of thought he didn’t voice. He rubbed at the side of his neck, thumb digging against the muscle there like a man trying to ground himself. His pulse was too loud in his ears. The idea of legends coming alive had always been laughable until now, and suddenly, it wasn’t funny anymore—it was dangerous. His stomach tightened as a darker thought edged through: if something like the Smiling One could slip into flesh, into faces, then nowhere was safe. Not his crew. Not his home. Not them. He didn’t let his expression break, but his fingers tapped once, sharply, against the table’s metal edge. “There has to be logic to it,” he muttered, more to himself than to Lannic. “Creatures don’t come out of stories. They hide in something. Somewhere.”

He stood, the movement sudden and precise, his coat catching the lamplight. “We start by finding where something like that could nest in this city,” he said, voice low, the calm masking the fear that had begun to curl beneath his ribs. “If it walks among us, it sleeps somewhere. And that’s where we’ll find it.” His gaze cut toward the window, watching the storm-thick streets beyond. “We end this before it spreads.” The words hung there, steady and cold, but in the flicker of light, his eyes betrayed something else—an old, quiet terror, not of death, but of loss. Of what would happen if the Smiling One ever found its way too close to the life he’d buried outside these walls.

Lannic stood still for a moment, the sound of the rain crawling down the glass filling the space where his reply should’ve been. When he finally spoke, it wasn’t sharp or commanding—it was the careful tone of a man who’d seen too many mistakes made in the name of urgency. “Arthur,”

he began, wiping his hands on a rag that was already black with oil, “you need to think before you move. Whatever this thing is, whatever you found—it’s bigger than what you can chase down alone. We regroup, we wait for Silas to return. By morning, we can pull Pierre and Brand from the lower stations. We do this the right way, not blind and not bleeding.” He tossed the rag aside and leaned against the bench, one hand braced against the wood. The gesture was half exhaustion, half authority. “You look ready to go charging into the dark again, and that’s exactly what he wants.”

Arthur’s eyes flicked up from the pocket watch to Lannic, and though his mouth stayed silent, his posture told the rest. The muscles in his jaw tightened once, his shoulders set forward a fraction of an inch—small tells of a man who had already decided the clock was ticking too fast. “You think I don’t know that?” he said finally, voice low, steady, but wired with something just beneath the surface. “Every hour I wait feels like a door closing somewhere. If this thing is what I think it is, it’s not just hunting strangers. It’s already moving, spreading.” He cut himself short, the weight of unspoken words pressing behind his teeth. The thought of what—or who—he might lose if he didn’t act fast enough burned behind his eyes. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, the stormlight catching the scar along his knuckles. “We’ve seen what Merrow can do with men. But if he’s turning myths into weapons, then we can’t sit on our hands and hope daylight fixes it.”

Lannic frowned, his brow furrowing deep as he exhaled through his nose, the sound tired but edged with worry. “Then where do you think he’d keep something like that?” he asked, tone almost rhetorical. He moved toward the wall map—an ink-stained sprawl of Doskvol, every line of canal and bridge drawn with a mechanic’s precision—and pressed his thumb against the area beyond the central districts. “If I were hiding something cursed, something that stinks of old blood and bad stories,” he said, tapping the map again, “I’d put it in Barrowcleft.” The name alone was enough to thicken the air. “The amusement park,” he continued. “On the inland side past the bridges. Shut down after the fires. The city pretends it doesn’t exist anymore, but the ghosts there don’t let people forget. Half the rides still stand, rusted to the bone, and even the Imperial patrols avoid it. No one with a brain sets foot in that place after sundown.”

Arthur rose from his chair slowly, eyes tracing the map’s faint lines until they landed on Barrowcleft’s mark. He could almost picture it—the dead Ferris wheel jutting through fog, the broken carousel horses scattered across cracked pavement, the laughter that used to echo there now replaced by whispers of something else. “An empty amusement park,” he murmured, the thought settling cold and correct in his chest. “A stage made for monsters.” His reflection in the glass of the map’s frame looked strange—hollow-eyed, damp with exhaustion, lit by the glow of a dying lamp. “If Merrow or his pet creature are anywhere near the city, that’s where they’ll be.” He said it without question, only certainty, like a mechanic naming the next step in a machine that couldn’t stop turning.

Lannic’s lips pressed into a thin line, the argument already half-lost. “At least wait until morning,” he said, his voice quiet but weighted. “We’ll send word to Silas, get the others, and plan it right. You walk in there alone tonight, you’ll vanish same as the rest. That place eats men and spits out their ghosts. You know that.” He ran a hand over his face, smearing oil across his cheek, and added, “You’ve survived too much to die chasing shadows, Arthur. Promise me you’ll wait.” His tone softened at the end, the plea buried inside the command.

Arthur gave him a small nod, slow and heavy, the kind of gesture that felt like agreement but wasn't. "You have my word," he said. The words landed flat but convincing enough to pass. Lannic seemed to accept them, though his gaze lingered a moment longer, searching for something behind Arthur's eyes that wasn't there anymore. When Lannic turned away to jot a note on the desk, Arthur's hand brushed the watch once more, thumb tracing the cracked glass frozen at 11:59. His jaw tightened. The storm outside was building again, thunder crawling along the horizon like a living thing. He adjusted his coat, slid the pistol into place beneath it, and looked toward the door. In his mind, the decision was already made. He would go before dawn, before the others could stop him. If the Smiling One was hiding in Barrowcleft, then Arthur would find him first—alone, if he had to.

The storm had broken sometime before dawn, leaving the world slick and glistening beneath a pale, exhausted sky. The air was heavy with the scent of wet earth and rust, the kind of smell that clung to the back of the throat and made every breath taste faintly of metal. Arthur moved through the mist-slick fields of Barrowcleft, boots sinking into the mud with each careful step. The horizon behind him was just beginning to lighten, the first gray hints of morning creeping over the rooftops of Doskvol, painting the city's broken skyline in dull pewter. Ahead, half-swallowed by the fog and the crawling weeds, stood the gates of the old amusement park. The entrance loomed like a monument to forgotten joy—its archway skeletal and rusted, the once-bright paint flaking away in jagged strips that fluttered when the wind caught them. What had once welcomed children now watched him approach like a mouth waiting to close.

The silence was oppressive, not empty but dense, filled with the faint hum of the waking city far behind him and the low groan of the Ferris wheel somewhere deeper inside the park. Arthur's lantern light cut through the wet air in uneven arcs, glinting off puddles and broken glass. His shadow stretched long and sharp across the ground, warping over the outlines of shattered benches and collapsed lamp posts. Every few steps, he'd pause, listening. The water dripping from the metal beams sounded almost like footsteps, the wind through the half-collapsed ticket booth like a low sigh. His pulse ticked steady beneath his ribs, not from fear—at least not the kind he'd name—but from the knowledge that there were too many places to hide, and too many things that could already be watching.

He carried enough gear to outfit a small team. The satchel over his shoulder rattled faintly with vials and wires, the edge of a dismantled glider prototype jutting out just far enough to catch the light. A small case of electroplasmic charges hung from his belt, and the weight of his pistol pressed constant against his ribs beneath the coat. Strapped along his thigh was a narrow device of Lannic's making, a tuned scanner that hummed when spectral energy moved too close. It had been silent for most of the walk—but as Arthur neared the park's gate, the faintest tremor began to pulse through its metal casing, a whisper of vibration he could feel even through his glove. He stopped, crouched, and held the device closer to the ground. The hum deepened. There was something here. Something not asleep.

He rose slowly, tightening the strap across his shoulder, his eyes tracking the outlines of the gate. The sign above it was half fallen, its remaining letters barely legible in the dim pre-dawn light: BARROWCLEFT FAIR. The rest had long since rusted away, leaving only holes where bolts once held the letters in place. The metal arch groaned softly as he passed beneath it, flakes of rust falling like dull red snow. Inside, the path split into two—the left veering toward

what must once have been a roller coaster, the other leading toward the old carousel square. The cracked ground was slick with rain and the skeletal remains of weeds that had forced their way through the asphalt. Arthur's lantern caught the edge of a collapsed popcorn stand, its glass shattered and its sign faded to the color of old bones. SWEETS & DELIGHTS, it read, the irony almost cruel now.

Arthur moved forward with the deliberate caution of a man walking into memory. He had never been here before, but something about the stillness felt too familiar—the ghosts of laughter that never quite died, the smell of sugar turned sour with age, the way shadows clung to the broken rides like they belonged there. A gust of wind sent one of the Ferris wheel's carriages creaking on its hinges, the sound cutting sharp through the fog. He paused, hand instinctively going to the pistol beneath his coat, his eyes scanning the distance where the ride stood like a black skeleton against the paling sky. The light was changing—thin streaks of gold were starting to seep into the mist, revealing the silhouettes of the park's other corpses: the collapsed funhouse, the empty bandstand, the carousel whose cracked horses seemed to watch him as he passed.

The lantern's flame flickered as he tightened his grip on its handle. He was close now—closer to whatever truth had dragged him out here before dawn, to the thing that wore the faces of men and left smiles carved in mud. The rainwater dripped from his coat as he reached for the gate's inner latch, and for a brief second, the sound of the city behind him vanished entirely. There was only the wind. Only the groan of old metal. Only the steady heartbeat of a man who knew he was walking into a place that had forgotten the living. Arthur exhaled, slow and steady, his breath fogging in the cold air. Then he stepped through the gate, and the park swallowed him whole.

Arthur stepped past the gate, the hinges shrieking once behind him like a warning too late to heed. The path sloped inward, half-swallowed by muck and creeping moss, the wet ground sucking faintly at his boots with every step. To his right, the old ticket cabin slumped against its own shadow, its glass windows shattered to dust and its wooden frame splintered and bent under years of rain and neglect. The sign above it, once painted in swirling reds and golds, hung by a single nail, swaying gently in the wind. The floorboards inside were hidden beneath vines thick as ropes, their roots twisting through the cracks as if nature had crawled up from the dirt to take back what it was owed. Arthur's lantern light slipped through the open window, catching on a half-rotted stool and the remnants of rusted coin trays, all empty. The ghosts of crowds that had once lined here seemed to cling to the air—whispers of laughter and clinking tokens now long dead, replaced by the low groan of distant metal and the hollow hiss of the wind.

He moved forward, boots crunching against broken glass and brittle weeds that crumbled beneath his weight. The old fairground stretched before him, wide and uneven, scattered with the bones of amusement that had turned to ruin. To his left, a row of cabins leaned together as if seeking comfort, their roofs half-collapsed and their paint eaten away until only gray wood remained. The walls bowed inward, heavy with ivy and time, and the air around them smelled faintly of mildew and rust. He passed what must have once been a shooting stall, its counter warped and blackened, a few tin targets still dangling from rusted hooks, swinging softly in the wind. His light flickered over the remnants of a painted sign—TEST YOUR AIM! WIN A PRIZE!—but the letters had bled into the wood, leaving behind something that looked more like a warning than an invitation.

Farther in, one of the great oaks that had clawed its way through the park had fallen, tearing through the old midway cabins on the right. Its trunk split one building clean in half, the wood shattered and curled inward, broken planks reaching upward like the fingers of something trying to crawl free. The smell of wet bark and decay was thick in the air. Arthur paused near the wreckage, kneeling to run a gloved hand along the jagged edge where the tree had hit the ground. The mud around it was deep and slick, untouched for years—except for the faint marks of something recent. Footsteps. He narrowed his eyes, following their uneven trail across the muck. They were small, perhaps a single person, but fresh enough that the puddled rain hadn't yet filled them. His heartbeat quickened, not in panic but in the taut rhythm of instinct sharpening to a blade's edge. Someone had been here.

He straightened, lantern lifting slightly higher, the orange light trembling across the wet bark of the fallen tree. The sound of his own breath was too loud in the quiet, a steady rise and fall that filled the silence like a drumbeat. He turned his head, scanning the shadows between the collapsed stalls and empty pavilions. Nothing moved. Not a bird. Not a rat. Not even the scrape of a mouse in the underbrush. The absence of life was wrong in a place this large—wrong enough to make his skin crawl. Even decay usually had its followers, but here, everything had stopped. The air itself felt heavy, thick with something unseen that pressed at the edges of his perception.

Arthur reached into his coat and pulled out the spectral scanner, thumb brushing the dial until the faint hum grew into a low, steady vibration. It had been flickering since he entered the park, but now the device pulsed almost constantly, its soft blue light bleeding through his glove. The readings were useless. In a place like this—where death had lingered long enough to carve its initials into the dirt—there was no way to tell what was real and what was residue. Ghosts didn't always mean danger, but they were never good company either. Arthur exhaled slowly, forcing the tension from his shoulders. He holstered the device and pressed onward, boots sinking deeper into the soft ground as he followed the trail through the wreckage. The scanner's light faded behind him, but the unease did not. The stillness of Barrowcleft clung to him like damp fabric, whispering with every breath that whatever he was chasing—it had already seen him coming.

Arthur extinguished every trace of light he carried, his lantern shuttered, the scanner wrapped and buried deep in his coat. Darkness closed around him like a cloak, thick and absolute, but he'd spent enough of his life walking through the places most men fled from. His eyes adjusted slowly to the half-light of dawn bleeding faintly through the fog, the faint glow of the sky touching the edges of broken rooftops. His breathing steadied, long and even, a practiced rhythm to still the pulse that wanted to drum louder in his chest. He moved forward, careful not to disturb the brittle branches or loose glass underfoot, his figure becoming part of the landscape—one more shadow among the countless ruins that filled this dead carnival. He followed the footprints, each step deliberate, the sound of mud giving beneath his boots quieter than a sigh. The trail wound through fallen fences and collapsed stands until it reached a cabin almost swallowed by ivy and time, its wooden panels warped, its door barely hanging by a hinge.

The building had likely served as a maintenance shed once, judging by the rusted tools scattered across the ground and the faint outline of a cracked sign that read *Staff Only* in peeling white paint. The air here was heavier, the smell of wet wood and oil fused into something that clung to the back of his throat. Arthur crouched briefly near the doorway, gloved

fingers brushing the edges of the footprints again—fresher here. Whoever had left them had entered not long ago. His gaze drifted upward, catching faint scratches along the frame, not claw marks but the grooves left by metal dragged too many times across the same surface. Keys? Locks forced open? He didn't wait to guess. He pushed the door open slowly, the old hinges exhaling a low, tired groan as it swung inward. Paint peeled from the walls in long, curling strips, revealing the raw, waterlogged wood beneath, and from the shattered entranceway shadows spilled inward like a slow tide.

The air inside hit him like a wall. The scent was dense and layered—rot, damp iron, and something sharper underneath, the burnt tang of old paper. It was the smell of erasure, of something once alive and vibrant having been methodically scrubbed out. Arthur's boot brushed against a pile of ashes near the threshold, and he knelt to inspect it. Not from a fire that burned wild—too clean, too deliberate. Someone had been trying to destroy records, not start chaos. He rose silently, eyes flicking across the cabin's interior. Old velvet seats, once arranged neatly along the back wall, slumped inward, their stuffing spilling out like gray entrails. The wooden floor was cracked, the boards warped from years of water seeping through the roof. What paint still clung to the walls was blistered and bubbled, curling up at the corners like the skin of something long dead.

Every sound in the place felt amplified—the faint creak of wood beneath his feet, the slow drop of condensation from the ceiling, the whisper of his coat shifting as he moved. Arthur's eyes scanned every corner, searching for what the dark tried to hide. It was supposed to be empty, this whole cursed park was, but the footsteps said otherwise. There were signs of movement here: a lantern recently used, the faint mark of fingers brushed clean through the layer of dust atop a workbench, a torn scrap of fabric caught on a nail. He exhaled through his nose, a steadying breath that came out colder than he expected. The silence pressed against his ears, unnatural, heavy enough that he could almost hear his heartbeat echo in the hollow space.

He followed the path deeper into the cabin, each step measured, the faint scent of something human threading through the rot. The corridor narrowed, ending in a door half-hidden behind a curtain of mildew-stained fabric. He brushed it aside and froze at the threshold. The air in the small room beyond was different—warmer, faintly alive. A lantern had burned here recently, the faint scent of oil still sharp in the air. The floorboards near the center of the room were free of dust, and a few small items were arranged in a crude circle—an empty cup, a half-burned candle, the remnants of food that hadn't yet turned. Arthur crouched near the entrance, one hand instinctively going to his weapon while the other reached forward, palm hovering an inch above the candle's melted wax. Still soft. Still warm. Someone had been here not long ago, close enough that if he listened, he thought he might still hear their breath caught somewhere in the dark.

Laid out across a crooked table were maps—dozens of them, some torn from city ledgers, others hand-drawn on butcher paper and scraps of parchment. They were layered like scales, overlapping in a chaos that still somehow spoke of purpose. Faded red ink traced along the veins of Doskvol's streets, a spiderweb of routes connecting warehouses, docks, and safehouses known only to the Cyphers. Each red line bled into the next, thickening in places where shipments overlapped, where secrets were moved beneath the noses of the law. Another, larger map pinned to the wall drew Arthur closer—its surface littered with green tacks, their metal heads dulled by grime. He stepped nearer and saw that each pin marked something

sickeningly familiar: the locations of the Ember Circle's interests, from old industrial shells to orphanages half-buried under government reform posters. It was no random scatter of dots. It was a campaign. A blueprint for a war already underway, spreading beneath the city's feet while the rest of Doskvol slept.

His gaze dropped to the center of the table where schematic pages were piled like offerings. Lannic's style, mirrored but butchered—handwritten equations twisted into violence, instructions for shaped charges and remote detonators, smudged with grease, ash, and fingerprints. One sheet had a crude sketch of a bridge, the next a tramline, then a factory. In the corner of another, the faint yellow smear of something oily—mustard, maybe, or some kind of mark left by careless hands. Arthur's jaw tightened. Whoever worked here had studied his people's devices well enough to make a parody of their craft. His eyes caught the glint of something small and round near the table's edge—a candleholder, still warm. And then, beside it, melted into the folds of the tablecloth, lay the thing that stopped his breath cold: a wax mask, warped by fire, half fused to the wood. Its features had melted beyond recognition except for one—its smile. The mouth stretched too wide, curved upward in a frozen mockery of joy, the wax hardened into a leer that reflected the faint dawn light from the cracked window.

Arthur stood motionless, the air in the cabin suddenly too thick to breathe. The smile stared back at him from the tabletop like a brand. Merrow's mark. His message. He could feel it now, the shape of the pattern snapping together in his mind—the riots, the fire that gutted the Iron Den, the breakout at Ironscar, the whispers of shapeshifters crawling through the city's veins. All of it had the same hand behind it, the same theatrical cruelty. And this—this rotting little command post—was proof. Proof that Merrow wasn't just haunting Doskvol's alleys; he was orchestrating the city's collapse like a conductor leading a symphony of madness. Arthur's pulse thundered in his ears as his eyes caught more scattered notes—snippets of letters, coded phrases, a half-finished list of names under the heading *Targets to Silence.* One of the names, faintly smudged, was Lannic's.

But he didn't have time to read more. A sound broke the stillness behind him—soft, deliberate, wrong. Too controlled for wind, too faint for a rat. Arthur spun on instinct, hand already on the pistol, coat flaring like a shadow breaking free. Two shapes lunged from the far corner, their movements jerky but fast, driven by something that wasn't entirely human. Their faces caught the dim light, and Arthur saw eyes wide and glassy, irises ringed with pale frost. Their mouths hung open like broken puppets, moving in eerie unison. "It's late, it's too late," they chanted, voices overlapping into a hollow echo. "Said the white rabbit." The sound made Arthur's stomach twist—it wasn't speech, it was mimicry, words pushed through unwilling throats. One of them lunged first, body lurching forward with terrifying speed. Arthur sidestepped just in time, feeling the rush of stale air as the man crashed into a stack of crates. Wood shattered in a spray of splinters, dust filling the room in a choking cloud.

The second attacker was faster, swinging a jagged length of pipe that whistled through the air, catching a spark as it clipped the edge of the table. Arthur dropped low, the movement fluid, and drove his shoulder into the man's legs, sending him sprawling across the debris. The pipe clattered away into the dark. The men didn't cry out; they didn't even flinch. They just rose again, limbs trembling but faces fixed in that awful glassy trance. "It's too late, too late," they repeated, voices tangled together, teeth red with spit and blood. Arthur's hand clenched around his pistol, but he hesitated for a half-second—he could see it now, behind their eyes, the twitch

of muscles that weren't their own, the pale threads of command still pulling them like marionettes. He shifted his stance, every nerve screaming for him to stay alive. This wasn't a fight against men anymore. It was against the infection of Merrow's madness, crawling straight out of the city's nightmares.

"Shit," Arthur muttered, realization sinking in like a blade through muscle—they weren't fighting to kill him. They were stalling him. Every feint, every chant, every blind lunge was meant to keep him in place. He pivoted hard, using their momentum against them, his boots sliding through the grime-slick floor as he grabbed one attacker by the collar. With a guttural growl, he spun the man into the path of the other, the impact cracking through the silence like thunder. The two crashed together, tangled in limbs and broken rhythm, and Arthur didn't hesitate—he drove his boot into one's ribs, feeling the sharp give beneath the blow as the air rushed out of the man's lungs in a guttural wheeze. They hit the floor in a heap, twitching like half-cut marionettes, the strange chanting devolving into a wet gurgle that made Arthur's skin crawl. He barely had time to breathe before the air shifted, sweet and spicy and sharp, the scent sliding through his senses like a memory gone rotten. It was cloying and wrong—molasses and vinegar and blood. Something burning and something dead. It smelled like a butcher's shop thrown into a kitchen fire.

"Ahhh, so the *Watchman* likes to play rough!" The voice came from somewhere above the haze, sing-song and manic, bouncing off the broken beams until Arthur couldn't place its origin. He turned, gun raised, every muscle drawn tight. And then he saw the shape. A man stepped out from the far side of the cabin, light glinting off his armor—if you could call it that. Plates of rusted tin and barrel metal bolted together haphazardly, the whole contraption patched with old copper and wire. Tubes and vials crisscrossed his back, filled with violent liquids that shimmered in the dim light—greens, yellows, oranges, some bubbling faintly as if alive. The smell hit stronger now, unbearable. The man's belt clanked with nozzles and squeeze bottles, his chest heaving under the weight of small metal tanks strapped in place with leather. And over his head—Arthur recognized that cracked glass dome, fogged on the inside with condensation and streaked with something that might've been grease or worse. Mitchell Marlowe.

Arthur's finger twitched on the trigger. "I've heard of you," he said, voice low, steady, dangerous. "Thought you rotted in Ironscar." The man inside the armor gave a laugh so wet it sounded like something drowning in its own saliva. "Oh, I did!" he crooned, arms spreading wide in grotesque showmanship. "But only the boring part of me. The tasty part escaped." He bent forward slightly, voice dipping into a mock whisper that carried far too easily through the still air. "With a little help from a friend who loves a good punchline." Before Arthur could respond, Marlowe yanked a lever on his belt with a flourish. A hiss filled the air—and then a jet of green sludge erupted from the gauntlet on his arm, splattering against the wall in a thick, sizzling spray. The acid chewed through the wood instantly, steam rising as it devoured its way downward, the stench of burning rot filling the room. Arthur dove behind a column, rolling into cover just as another jet streaked past his shoulder.

"You really should try my new blend!" Marlowe called, the glee in his tone making it worse. "Ghost pepper relish with just a hint of rat poison! Pairs well with betrayal!" Arthur shot back twice, the first bullet sparking off the wall, the second slamming into the armor plate across Marlowe's chest. The man staggered but didn't fall; instead, he grinned—wide and cracked, a smear of something oily dripping from inside the helmet. "Oof! Spicy!" he jeered, and then

vaulted over a support beam with manic energy, landing in a squelch of mud and shattered glass. Arthur's patience broke. He reached into his coat, thumb striking a fuse alight with a hiss. The flame caught, small and hungry. "I've had enough of your mouth," he said, voice like gravel.

"So has everyone," Marlowe snorted, tossing a jar from his belt, "but they keep coming back for seconds!" The glass hit the air halfway between them. Arthur shot it mid-flight, shattering it into a cloud of thick, yellow gas that filled the room with choking brightness. Visibility vanished. The firebomb in Arthur's hand went wide, bursting against a crate, flames licking the edges of the broken maps. Shadows danced across the walls, and in that chaotic glow, the two men circled each other—the madman spewing arcs of boiling brine and pepper-thick glue, the engineer ducking low, pivoting with quick, trained precision. Arthur's moves were all calculation, cold and clean, but Marlowe was a different kind of enemy: unpredictable, clumsy in the way only the deranged can be, his rhythm too chaotic to anticipate. He chattered through it all, words spilling like nonsense through the helmet's filters. "You know what you lack, Cypher?" he shouted between bursts of laughter and pressure-valve hisses. "Style! All you Cyphers and spies—always so serious! What you need is a little zest!"

Arthur lunged through the smoke, finding his mark by sound alone. His fist connected with the side of Marlowe's helmet, the impact ringing through his knuckles like hitting iron. The madman reeled backward, crashing into the map table. Wood split, parchment scattered like feathers in a storm, glass vials rolling off into the dark. Arthur didn't pause; he advanced, jaw tight, pistol raised again, breath steady through the smoke as the flames crawled higher across the floor. But Marlowe—bleeding laughter from behind the glass—only spread his arms, as if inviting the chaos in, and whispered through the crackling air, "Now that's flavor."

The air in the ruined room had turned thick and poisonous, a shimmering haze of smoke, acid, and gunpowder clinging to every breath. Arthur ducked beneath another wild spray of glowing orange liquid, the stuff hissing as it struck a nearby wall and immediately began eating through the wood like a living creature. He rolled to the side, coughing, his eyes stinging as chemical fumes clawed at his lungs. Mitchell Marlowe's laughter cut through the roar of the small fires licking across the debris. He was in his element—dancing through chaos, the glass of his helmet reflecting the flickering flame like a devil's lantern. "What's the matter, Watchman? Don't like a little seasoning?" he jeered, shaking a vial loose from his belt and tossing it underhand. It shattered at Arthur's feet, splattering something thick and purple that smoked where it touched the ground. Arthur leapt back, the soles of his boots sizzling, the stench of vinegar and rot filling the space between them.

Arthur dove behind a rusted column, his breath short, reloading his pistol by touch. He risked a glance over the side just in time to see Marlowe twist one of the valves on his gauntlet, spraying twin jets of crimson fluid that ignited midair, turning the space before him into a wall of fire. The heat seared his cheek as he ducked, the edge of his coat catching ember sparks that hissed and died. His hand fumbled through his gear pouch, pulling free a small brass sphere—a flare grenade—and tossed it into the smoke. The burst of light threw Marlowe's shadow against the wall, a monstrous silhouette of tubes, tanks, and manic energy. Arthur fired, one, two, three times, bullets punching through the armor but not stopping the man behind it. Each hit only made Marlowe laugh harder. "You're making holes in my art, Watchman!" he bellowed. "That's vandalism!"

Arthur's patience thinned to a thread. He tore open another pouch—one of the crawlies, quick and sharp, its spindly legs unfolding as he twisted the priming gear. "Let's see how you like this," Arthur muttered, setting it loose toward Marlowe's boots. The mechanical spider scuttled across the scorched floor, its sensor lights flashing red as it homed in. Marlowe saw it and howled with manic glee, twisting his gauntlet's nozzle toward it. "Ohhh, I just thought of another one!" he cackled, raising his arm like a showman basking in applause. "Listen to this! Watchman? More like *What-man!*" He burst into hysterical laughter, doubled over, the sound shrill and broken, echoing through the collapsing room. The acid jet hit the crawlie dead-on. The thing shrieked in metallic agony, its joints hissing as the acid ate through its casing. Arthur's eyes widened. He knew that sound. He'd built the damn thing. That was the fuse going volatile.

He lunged for it, instinct overriding reason. The crawlies were armed with miniature explosive cores—enough to blow a man in half if triggered improperly. "Shit!" Arthur grabbed it, the metal hot under his gloves, and tried to fling it out through the broken window. But the acid had already eaten through its shell. The trigger shorted with a spark, and everything went white. The explosion ripped through the room with the roar of a cannon, shattering glass, splintering walls, and tossing debris like hail. The world flipped—Arthur felt himself thrown backward, his body weightless for an instant before the glass of the window erupted outward. He and Marlowe were both flung through it, blasted into the cold dawn air, shards of rusted metal and fragments of burning wood tumbling alongside them.

Arthur hit the ground hard, rolling through the wet grass outside, his coat catching flame along one side. He smothered it with a snarl, coughing up smoke, ears ringing from the blast. Behind him, the room was half-collapsed, flames licking out through the broken walls like searching hands. Somewhere in that wreckage, Marlowe's laugh still carried—fainter now, but unmistakably alive. Arthur lifted his head, face streaked with ash and blood, his pistol lost somewhere in the debris. His chest heaved, and his breath came in ragged gasps. The sky above was turning pale with the first touch of morning, smoke trailing like ghosts across the park's ruined rides. The silence that followed was deafening, broken only by the slow creak of the Ferris wheel swaying in the wind—and the distant sound of laughter fading into the mist.

Arthur heard it first—the wet slap of boots against mud, the shuffle of someone trying to get their footing. He turned sharply, vision swimming through smoke and lingering dust, just in time to catch sight of Mitchel's lurching frame disappearing into the silhouette of another ruined building. The bastard had fallen—Arthur saw the splash of muck rise where he'd slipped—but by the time Arthur raised his pistol, Marlowe was already halfway through a broken doorway, slipping inside with a hiss of laughter that carried through the damp air. Arthur fired twice, but the shots went wide, sparking against rusted metal. Then came the taunt—sharp, sing-song, echoing from the dark like a child's cruel rhyme. "Missed!" he called out, voice bouncing through the walls in a warped, gleeful pitch that made Arthur's jaw tighten. He holstered the weapon and pushed forward, cutting through the drifting haze, refusing to let the trail die.

He crossed the threshold of the building, boots squelching on the wet floor, and immediately felt a wrongness in the air—like the temperature had dropped, the damp cold clinging to his skin. He took one more step, then froze. The dim light from the broken windows caught a glimmer that wasn't metal or water. He turned his head, and there he was—staring straight at himself. The reflection was warped, the surface grimy and cracked, but unmistakable. Arthur blinked, then realized there were more of them. Dozens. Mirrors of every size and shape lining the walls,

tilted at strange angles, catching and fracturing the light until it seemed like the entire room was alive with silent ghosts of him. Each reflection stared back with the same grim eyes, the same clenched jaw, but somehow… not quite right. A half-second delay. A shadow of movement where there shouldn't have been one.

He stepped carefully, the floor groaning under his weight, every reflection warping with each shift of light. This must've been one of the old attractions—the mirror maze from Barrowcleft's glory days. Now it looked like something dragged straight out of a nightmare. Cracked glass hung from the ceiling like jagged teeth, and the smell of mildew, rust, and old grease filled the air. Somewhere deeper in the maze, Mitchel's laugh echoed again, thin and hollow. "C'mon, Watchman," he crooned, his voice drifting from mirror to mirror, never in the same place twice. "You like reflections, don't you? So many of you to keep me company!" Arthur kept his pistol raised, turning slow circles as he moved deeper in. His pulse was heavy in his ears, breath coming in short bursts. He tried to catch a glimpse of something—anything—that wasn't himself.

Then the shot came. Sharp. Sudden. A flash of muzzle light somewhere to his left. The bullet tore through the air and punched into his shoulder, spinning him back against one of the mirrors. It cracked from the impact, splintering into a spiderweb of fractured glass that threw his reflection into a thousand broken shards. Pain bloomed across his arm, hot and blinding, but Arthur grit his teeth, lifted the gun with his good hand, and fired back. Once. Twice. Three times. Each shot shattered another reflection—another dozen versions of himself collapsing into glittering dust on the floor. His breath rasped through clenched teeth, the echoes of gunfire bouncing endlessly through the maze until it was impossible to tell which direction the last shot had come from.

"Careful now," Mitchel's voice purred from somewhere unseen, playful and cruel. "You keep that up, and you'll run out of you before you run out of bullets." His laughter crawled along the mirrors, disembodied and strange, warping with every echo until it sounded like there were three of him, or ten, or none at all. Arthur pressed his back to the nearest wall, his eyes darting across the reflections that surrounded him. Somewhere out there, Marlowe was moving—he could feel it. The scent of chemicals was still strong, the faint drip of something corrosive hitting the ground. His pulse pounded hard enough to drown out his thoughts. Every mirrored face that stared back looked almost real now, almost alive, their mouths twitching into faint, distorted smiles that didn't belong to him.

Then the laughter came again, closer this time—just behind the glass. "Smile for me, Watchman," Mitchel whispered, and the maze swallowed the words whole.

Arthur had been outmaneuvered—cornered inside that twisted maze of reflections where every version of himself felt like another ghost waiting to take his place. His breath came ragged and shallow, his shoulder burning from the earlier wound, his boot slipping in the thin layer of muck coating the cracked tiles. The mirrors shimmered with the softest tremor of movement, reflections twitching a heartbeat too late, as if mocking his hesitation. He could feel it deep down—this room wasn't just a trap, it was a tomb. A place where men came to die and left behind nothing but their echoes. But Arthur had one more task now, something louder than fear, heavier than the pain in his bones: survive. He had to survive this fight with Mitchell Marlowe, because there were people waiting for him, people who could never know what it cost him to keep them safe. They were the faces he never mentioned to Lannic, the memories he kept

locked behind clenched teeth, and thinking of them now set his resolve like iron. He would crawl out of this ruin or he'd die fighting for the chance.

Another shot cracked through the air, the muzzle flash painting the mirrors in a strobe of color and chaos. Pain erupted in Arthur's foot, sharp and immediate, forcing him down to one knee. His gun clattered against the floor, skidding out of reach, and he had to bite back a scream as his boot filled with warmth. Mitchel was toying with him now. The shots weren't meant to kill—not yet. They were cruel, deliberate, a sadistic game meant to stretch out the inevitable. "That's it, Watchman!" Mitchel's voice bounced off the mirrors, laughing between the walls. "Dance a little! Let's see what color you bleed!" The sound of his laughter mixed with the faint hiss of dripping chemicals and the metallic tang of blood in the air. Arthur forced himself upright, clutching the edge of a broken frame for balance, his breath fogging against the glass. He had no direction anymore—only instinct. His eyes scanned the floor, the walls, the infinite reflections. And then he saw it—one of the floorboards near the far corner, warped and soft from water damage.

A plan formed in an instant. It wasn't clever. It wasn't safe. But it was something. Arthur ducked low, wincing as the weight on his injured foot sent spikes of pain shooting up his leg. He heard another gunshot, felt the air cut past his ear, another mirror bursting into glittering shards beside him. He didn't stop. He sprinted—or tried to—dragging his bad foot through the muck and glass, aiming for that one rotted plank ahead. Mitchel's laughter followed him, loud and shrill. "Run, little Watchman, run! Let's make this exciting!" Two more shots chased him down. One clipped the edge of his sleeve; the other shattered a mirror just ahead, showering him in dust and shards. Arthur leapt, the board giving a sick groan under his weight before collapsing completely. The world tilted and dropped beneath him.

He fell hard, the air leaving his chest in a violent rush. The darkness below swallowed him whole, the crash muffled by layers of debris and damp earth. For a moment, all he could hear was the ringing in his ears and the distant creak of settling wood above. Then came Mitchel's voice, fainter now but still thick with amusement. "Oh, that's beautiful! Didn't think you'd take the fast way down!" He laughed, wheezing between breaths. "I ain't going there! Not as stupid as you think. Be back in a week after you've starved to death, Cypher!" His words echoed off the ruined beams, then faded into silence. Arthur lay there, chest heaving, staring up at the fractured light spilling through the hole above him.

He didn't move for a long while. Just breathed. Let the silence grow thick again until even the sound of his pulse began to fade into it. The floor above creaked once more—then nothing. Mitchel was gone. Arthur forced himself upright, leaning against the cold wall of the basement, wiping a line of blood from his brow. The place was colder down here, heavier, the air thick with mildew and the faint metallic tang of rust. He waited longer still, until the light through the hole changed from dull gray to the pale warmth of morning. Then, finally, he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out his last tool—a single crawlie, the tiny mechanical spider resting cold in his palm. He pressed the small rune along its abdomen. Its eyes flickered to life in a soft orange glow. "Go on," Arthur whispered under his breath.

The little machine scurried a few paces across the ground, its legs tapping softly against the stone. Arthur waited, watching the tiny lights blink. No movement. No signal. No enemies detected. Only him. He closed his hand into a fist, the weight of the exhaustion finally settling on

his shoulders. Mitchel was gone. He'd survived. For now. And as the first rays of daylight crept through the cracks in the ruined floor, Arthur Xavier—bloodied, limping, and alone—knew that the war Merrow Valesque was waging wasn't over. It was only changing shape.

Story: **Lord Veylock and Morten Discuss the News**

The study in Lord Veylock's estate was quiet, the shadows in the room stretching long as the fire flickered low. Morten sat with the latest edition of the Blade Chronicle, the weight of the news settling over him like a storm cloud. He shook his head, half-amused, half-concerned, before tossing the paper onto the table. He glanced up at his master.

Morten:
"Veylock, have you seen this? The Assumption Church attacked, and now the Ember Circle linked to it? Makes you wonder how deep their roots really go in this city. And the Crows—well, they're in the thick of it now, aren't they?"

Lord Veylock looked up from his glass, his usual poise betraying an edge of concern. The events unfolding in Doskvol had caught his attention, particularly the growing influence of the Crows and the startling revelations about the Ember Circle. He took a slow sip from his drink before setting it down with a deliberate calm.

Lord Veylock:
"I've seen it. It's... hardly surprising, Morten. The Ember Circle, hiding in plain sight at Assumption Church? Bold, even by their standards. And if this comes to light, if it's confirmed, it will rattle the city. The news could tear through Doskvol like wildfire—'a criminal faction running a religious institution'—do you see the implications of that?"

Morten leaned back in his chair, folding his arms. The idea was unsettling, but the bigger picture was becoming clearer with every word he read.

Morten:
"Aye, and it's strange, isn't it? Even with all this violence, the Crows—'trying to protect civilians'—are being seen as the lesser evil. A witness says, 'Even if the Crows were involved, I saw one of them—maybe more—standing between the fighting and the people. They were trying to protect the civilians.' Funny, that."

Lord Veylock:
"It's curious indeed. The Crows, protecting the innocent? It makes one wonder if they're trying to brand themselves as something else—maybe they want to make sure they're seen as the saviors of Doskvol, not just the troublemakers. But you're right, Morten. That's the game they're playing. There's a fine line between villain and hero in Doskvol, and they know it. But it's their alliance with the Skarrenfolk that I worry about—Elara Voss vouching for them. That's no small thing."

Morten's eyes flickered to the fire. He wasn't too concerned about the Crows, or the Ember Circle, for that matter. His thoughts were more focused on the future—on what was about to happen in Doskvol.

Morten:
"I don't see why you're so worried about the Crows. They're a problem, sure, but a manageable one. The real issue, Veylock, is the rising star of Captain Morian Ishtar. He's already made a name for himself in the Imperial Police, hasn't he? A man like that, with the backing of the Espiritas and the military, he could clean up this city. He could rid us of all these gangs. Maybe it's exactly what Doskvol needs."

Lord Veylock
"And that, Morten, is exactly what concerns me."

Lord Veylock's voice had a darker edge as he leaned forward, his eyes narrowing.

Lord Veylock:
"I've been watching Captain Ishtar's rise with more than a little unease. Don't misunderstand me—I see the appeal of a man who can bring order, but what's his real goal? If he wins the governorship, he could make life very difficult for everyone in our circle. The man's got a reputation for efficiency and ruthlessness. His work with the Imperial Police and his involvement in Merrow Valesque's arrest made him a hero in the eyes of the public. He's a clean slate, and Doskvol loves a clean slate. But do you really think he'll stop at ridding the city of the Ember Circle and the Crows? No. He'll go further."

Morten shook his head, unconcerned.

Morten:
"You're overthinking it, Veylock. If he can clean up the city, what's the problem? Things are getting worse by the week. Gangs are at each other's throats, and Daava has done nothing but make backroom deals with the criminal underworld. We need someone who can step up. It doesn't have to be so complicated."

Lord Veylock:
"Oh, it's very complicated, Morten. You think Morian Ishtar will stop at cleaning up the streets? No, he'll want to consolidate power. And if he does—if he becomes the governor—it'll be an entirely different city. His military tactics, his 'order'—it won't be long before those who are used to pulling the strings in the shadows are stripped of their power."

Lord Veylock paused for a moment, considering the weight of what he was saying. Then he quoted directly from the article, his voice low but certain.

Lord Veylock:
"'If Daava is not found and brought in for questioning before Election Day, Captain Ishtar will likely be elected by default, as he remains the only candidate still in the running.' If that happens, it will mark a dramatic shift in the city's political landscape. Ishtar will have the full weight of the law behind him, and the rest of us? We'll be under his scrutiny."

Morten leaned forward, his eyes wide.

Morten:
"Are you saying we should fear him, then? That's a bit much, isn't it? He's just a man, Veylock. With all his talk of law and order, that's exactly what we need. The city's overrun with crime. If we don't get a handle on things, we'll all be in danger. Even you, my lord."

Lord Veylock's gaze hardened.

Lord Veylock:
"You don't understand, Morten. If Ishtar is elected, the entire city will be his target. Every faction, every criminal group—ours included—will be hunted like rats in a cage. And I've lived too long in the shadows to be caught by a man like him. He'll come for us all eventually. You might think this is about cleaning up the city, but it's not. It's about power. He wants it all."

Morten looked down, pondering Veylock's words. He'd always seen Doskvol's troubles as something to be cleaned up, a mess to be swept away. But Veylock was right about one thing: Ishtar wasn't a mere cleanup man. He was a man who would reshape Doskvol. And no one, not even the powerful Lord Veylock, could predict what that would mean for them.

Morten:
"So what do we do then, Veylock? We sit back and let Ishtar take the throne?"

Lord Veylock:
"No. We wait. We let Daava's scandal unravel itself. We let the city turn against him. But we don't let Ishtar rise unchallenged. Not yet. There's always room for us to maneuver."

Lord Veylock stood, his figure towering over the firelight. His next words were cold, deliberate.

Lord Veylock:
"If Ishtar becomes governor, Morten, it will be the end of everything we know. We must make sure that doesn't happen—or if it does, that we are ready to play our hand in a very different game."

Morten nodded slowly, his thoughts a little heavier now. He had underestimated the stakes, but Lord Veylock had a way of making everything seem more... significant.

Morten:
"I understand, my lord. We wait. But we'll be watching."

Lord Veylock turned away, his eyes glinting in the low light as he stared out the window, the weight of Doskvol's future pressing down on him.

Lord Veylock:
"Yes, Morten. We wait... and we prepare."

Chapter 10: **Laughter in the Veins**

The rain had stopped hours ago, but the smell of it lingered in the narrow alleys of Crow's Ward, caught between the bricks and the ghosts of the gutters. Syloki's boots made no sound as she crossed the threshold into the back garden of that same unremarkable house she had once entered with Arthur. The vines had grown thicker since then, curling across the doorframe of the shed like veins choking the wood, their damp leaves slick beneath her fingertips as she pushed the door open. The same cold breath of the underground met her—damp earth, candle soot, and the faint metallic scent of wards humming through the stairwell. Every step she took down those stone stairs pulled a memory closer: the shaking air, the spirit's scream, the stink of burning copper and blood. She remembered how her lungs had trembled afterward, how her voice had failed when she tried to thank Lysandra for surviving her own miracle. And yet here she was again, seeking more of what had almost broken her, driven by a hunger that had outgrown fear.

The glow from the warded walls pulsed slower now, steadier, the phosphorescent sigils more defined than before. Lysandra had strengthened her defences—Syloki could feel the difference in her teeth, the pressure behind her eyes, as if the house itself judged her return. She adjusted her hood, tucking a stray curl back into place as she descended the final step and came to the landing. The faint sound of voices reached her first—Lysandra's low, melodic tone, and another voice, young but sharp-edged, like a blade being tested on the air. As Syloki stepped into the open mouth of the sanctum, she caught the tail end of their exchange. Lysandra stood by the central table, her expression unreadable, while across from her was a girl who seemed far too composed for her youth. The girl stood tall, shoulders squared, her long frame wrapped in a dark coat that gleamed faintly where droplets from the rain still clung. Her silver nail-shaped earrings caught the candlelight like twin sparks, flashing cold and quick as her eyes darted up to Syloki.

The girl's presence was all precision—every movement deliberate, her chin lifted just enough to signal defiance without disrespect. She was seventeen, if that, but there was calculation behind her stare, the kind of mind already used to spinning lies into currency. A faint smudge of soot marked her cheek, the residue of either mischief or work—perhaps both. Her lips parted in the ghost of a grin as she regarded Syloki briefly, but it vanished the instant Lysandra spoke her name. "Good work tonight, Nailspark," the Whisper said, voice calm but clipped. "You'll need to rest before your next venture. Keep your wards clean and your conscience cleaner." The girl inclined her head with that same eerie maturity that comes from growing up too fast, muttering a short "Yes, ma'am" before brushing past Syloki with the faint scent of smoke and cheap perfume trailing after her. Syloki turned slightly to watch her go, noting the glint of her earrings one last time as she disappeared up the stairs, the echo of her boots fading until only the low hum of the sanctum remained.

"Your students are getting younger," Syloki remarked lightly as she stepped further in, pulling back her hood. Her tone was breezy, the same teasing charm she used to disarm tension, though her eyes were already scanning the shelves, tracing the changes since her last visit. Some jars were new—others gone entirely, replaced by heavier seals and thicker glass. A faint sigil of protection had been added to the ceiling beams, drawn in fresh blue chalk. Lysandra, without turning, gestured for her to close the door behind her. "They come younger every year," she replied softly. "Curiosity is a fire the city feeds early. Better they learn control before the flames consume them." Syloki smiled faintly, lowering her hood and shaking her damp curls loose. "You say that like you weren't half their age when you started pulling ghosts out of the

walls.” Lysandra finally turned her head, one brow arching, the candlelight casting a line of gold across her cheek. “I didn’t have a choice,” she said simply.

Syloki moved closer to the table, her boots echoing faintly across the stone, her fingers brushing against the back of the same chair she had once sat in beside Arthur. She didn’t sit this time. Her energy was different now—quieter on the surface, but more focused, like a fuse waiting for flame. “And now you do,” she said softly, eyes drifting over the half-finished ritual circle on the table. “You choose who to help, who to teach, who to warn away. I respect that.” Lysandra regarded her in silence for a heartbeat, the air between them thick with unspoken recognition. Syloki filled it the only way she knew how—with words, a quick current of chatter that hid the pulse of her intent. “You’ve been busy down here. Stronger wards, tighter sigils. Are you expecting trouble, or are you just redecorating for the sake of ambience?” A faint glimmer of amusement flickered at the corner of Lysandra’s mouth before it vanished again. “Experience teaches precaution,” she said. “Some spirits are not meant to be disturbed. Some doors should never be opened twice.”

Syloki let the words hang in the air, pretending to take them as casual advice rather than the warning they were. She leaned her hands against the table, letting her gaze wander briefly to the flickering jars on the shelves. The silence stretched between them like a held breath before Lysandra finally broke it, her tone calm but carrying that subtle edge of concern that only those who truly saw Syloki could manage. “You didn’t come here for pleasantries,” she said, eyes narrowing just slightly, reading her posture as one would a divination card. “So tell me, Syloki—what is it you’re looking for tonight?”

Syloki gave a laugh that didn’t quite match the tension in her shoulders, brushing her fingers through her hair as she leaned forward over the table like someone about to share a secret rather than make a request. Her smile was bright, a practiced sort of brightness that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Oh, what I’m looking for tonight, and most nights as a matter of fact, you cannot find for me, my dear. But gods, how I wish that you could.” Her tone carried a sing-song quality, teasing but frayed at the edges with exhaustion and something heavier underneath it. She sighed, a hand fluttering near one of the lit candles, casting its flicker briefly over her face before she added, “But there might be something more your alley, I hope. A dead guy, I believe.” Her phrasing made it sound almost casual, like she was asking about a lost glove rather than a corpse, but Lysandra caught the subtle weight in it—the strain that hinted at too many sleepless nights chasing shadows. The Whisper’s lips curved faintly, a shadow of amusement in her calm expression. “You’ll have to be a little more specific than that, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, specific, yes, of course,” Syloki replied quickly, clapping her hands together once as if summoning her thoughts into order, though her mind was clearly already three steps ahead. “I’ve been chasing a name, or maybe a story—it’s hard to tell these days, you know how whispers tend to twist things when they pass through too many mouths. The name is Mister Smile. He’s supposed to have been a maskmaker, an illusionist of sorts. The kind of fellow who could make a face vanish or reappear on someone else if the mood struck him. And from what I’ve gathered through the Gloam archives, and the less reputable storytellers in the Docks, he had ties to the Royal Family.” Her voice softened there, the name heavy on her tongue, carrying all the ghosts that came with it. “Old gang, violent, theatrical, fond of jokes that left no one laughing. He was one of theirs. Officially dead for decades, or so the archives claim.”

Lysandra didn’t answer right away. The flicker of the nearest candle bent slightly toward her, as though the air itself had tightened around her stillness. Her eyes, always steady, narrowed almost imperceptibly, but enough that Syloki noticed. That flicker of apprehension in the usually unflappable Whisper caught Syloki’s attention more than any words could have. “You’ve heard of him then?” Syloki asked, voice low but eager, stepping closer with the curiosity of a cat that knew the trap was set but couldn’t help itself. Her grin was small, forced, the kind worn by

someone pretending not to care how deeply the answer might cut. Lysandra's gaze drifted toward one of the sealed jars on the shelf, the ghostlight inside pulsing faintly like a heartbeat. She drew a slow breath before she answered. "He's not just a story whispered in the alleys anymore, if that's what you're asking," she said finally. "Most of Doskvol knows that name now, though they may not understand what they're repeating when they speak it."

The silence that followed seemed to stretch, heavy with the invisible residue of names best left unspoken. Syloki broke it with a scoff, trying to shake off the weight with her usual bright irreverence. "You make it sound like saying his name three times will drag him out of the walls." Lysandra's expression didn't change, but her eyes flicked briefly to the shadows that clung to the corners of the room before returning to Syloki. "He used to be a follower of Merrow," she said evenly, each word deliberate. "One of the Royal Family's craftsmen. Their maskmaker. Their jester. Their whisperer behind the curtains. When Merrow laughed, he was often the one who'd given him the face to do it with." The words carried the faintest tremor beneath their calm surface, a ripple Syloki caught and filed away in the part of her mind where she stored every secret that could matter later.

"And now?" Syloki asked softly, her voice no longer teasing, her curiosity sharpened into something cold. "Now," Lysandra replied, folding her hands together and resting them atop the table, "he's gone. Dead. Long enough that only fools and mediums still chase him. Four years, I'd wager, since his final performance." Her eyes met Syloki's across the candlelight, the grey of them deep and unwavering. "You don't need to worry about Mister Smile anymore. He's one of the few who actually managed to stay buried." The quiet that followed wasn't comforting—it hummed with the faint dissonance of unfinished truths, as if both women knew that Doskvol never let its dead rest for long.

Syloki tilted her head with that deliberate kind of innocence she always wore when she was about to say something dangerous. Her lips curled faintly, the beginnings of a smirk that didn't quite hide the tremor beneath her tone. "Well, if you could help me get him unburied, even if just for a question or two," she said, her words lilting like a bribe wrapped in a joke, "I could pay you in kind. Favors, coin, information—you name it. I've gotten better at digging up the kind of truths people pay good money to keep hidden." Her voice was light, almost playful, but the glint in her eyes betrayed a deeper desperation—something personal, gnawing just beneath the surface. Lysandra, however, didn't take the bait. The Whisper's expression remained unreadable, her hands resting still upon the table, the candlelight outlining the calm precision of her features. "This isn't about the price, Syloki," she said softly, her voice steady as if she were coaxing a child back from the edge of a dream. "Why are you so interested in a long-dead maniac?"

Syloki gave a low chuckle, the sound brittle, the kind that carried too much breath and not enough laughter. She leaned forward, elbows resting on the edge of the table, fingers tapping idly against the wood as her eyes flicked up toward Lysandra's. "Because the living lie," she said simply. "And the dead… they don't have that luxury anymore." Her tone hardened at the end, her jaw tightening as if the weight of her own words had landed harder than expected. "I've been knocking on doors, whispering names, even paying a few bribes—and every answer leads me back to him. Everyone talks about the Royal Family, about Merrow, about the fire. But no one talks about the maskmaker. No one talks about Mister Smile. And I think maybe he was the one who saw everything burn from the inside." She stopped tapping, her fingers curling slowly into her palm. "If anyone knows what really happened that night, it's him."

The flicker of the candles caught the sharp line of Lysandra's brow as she frowned, her posture still but charged with the kind of stillness that preceded storms. "You want me to summon him?" she asked, not in disbelief but in weary recognition, as though she had already guessed where the conversation was going and prayed she was wrong. Syloki tilted her head again, her voice gentler now, almost imploring. "Can you summon someone who's been gone for a long time?"

she asked. It wasn't just curiosity anymore—there was a quiet ache in the way she spoke it, a trace of the same hunger that had once driven her to follow Arthur into that first séance. Lysandra's response came before the echo of the question had even faded. Her frown deepened, eyes narrowing as she exhaled through her nose, a long, slow sound of quiet disapproval. "You're not asking for a consultation, then. You're asking for a resurrection of sorts. Something unnatural, even by my standards."

Syloki didn't answer right away, her eyes darting toward one of the spirit jars on the shelf as though expecting it to move. The silence was fragile, stretched thin between them, until Lysandra broke it with that calm, teacher's cadence that always made even her warnings sound like prophecies. "The older a ghost is," she began, "the less it remembers what it once was. The more it forgets language, shape, purpose. All that remains are the echoes—the obsession, the pain, the repetition of the last moments that anchored them here. The longer they linger, the less human they become." She stepped closer to the table, her shadow falling over the half-faded chalk circle. "They are not memories, Syloki. They are not people waiting to be spoken to. They are fragments of agony that never learned how to stop screaming."

Syloki's lips parted as if to argue, but the words faltered before they formed. Her eyes searched Lysandra's face, tracing the calm certainty etched there, but beneath it she sensed something else—fear, not of Syloki's recklessness, but of what might answer if the ritual succeeded. "So they're dangerous," Syloki said finally, her tone measured, though her hands betrayed her with the faint tremor of restless energy. "But they still remember something. The obsession, you said." Lysandra's gaze hardened, her voice cutting through the dim like the edge of a knife. "Yes. But obsession doesn't mean truth. It means fixation. They will show you what they *felt*, not what *was*. And they will drag you into it until you can't tell the difference." The words hit Syloki like the chill of open air after stepping too close to the flame. She swallowed, the spark of fear flickering behind her eyes before she smothered it beneath a fragile smile. "Then I suppose I'll just have to be careful," she said quietly. Lysandra didn't return the smile—she only looked at her with the weariness of someone watching a storm gather and knowing she could not stop the rain.

Syloki straightened, her voice quickening with that spark of conviction that always followed her curiosity when it crossed the line into obsession. Her hands moved as she spoke, tracing invisible lines through the candlelight, her gestures half-conjuring the images she painted with words. "You said he was close to Merrow, didn't you? Then he must've seen things—heard things—back when all of this madness began. If I can reach him, I might be able to understand what started it. Maybe even what changed Lira." Her tone softened at that last name, almost reverent, almost pitying, though a storm still coiled beneath the calm of her voice. "Everyone talks about her like she was just another monster, but I've seen her eyes when Merrow's name comes up. There's something else there. Something she won't speak of. If Mister Smile knew her—really knew her—then he might hold the truth neither of them ever wanted told." She leaned forward on the table again, her shadow spilling across the circle etched into the stone. "You can't tell me that kind of knowledge isn't worth the risk."

Lysandra's eyes darkened, her voice losing that earlier calm and replacing it with something quieter, heavier, like a door being locked. "You think truth is worth the dead clawing their way back through the veil?" she asked. "You think Lira Quinval needs *you* digging up ghosts for her? You don't understand what you're asking, Syloki." The name carried weight, a warning disguised as care. But then the Whisper exhaled slowly, her shoulders easing a fraction as she realized that reason alone would not move this woman in front of her. There was a long silence, filled only by the faint hum of wards and the subtle hiss of candlewax melting. Then Lysandra reached into the folds of her cloak and drew out a small slip of parchment, folded so many times it had softened at the creases. "If I were to help you," she said at last, voice measured and deliberate, "I wouldn't summon him. But there is a way to *find* him. Or what's left of him."

Syloki's breath caught, and her entire posture changed—head tilting slightly, eyes brightening with the kind of greedy hope that Lysandra recognized all too well. "I'm listening," Syloki murmured, her voice almost reverent. Lysandra laid the paper flat on the table between them, pressing one finger to its center. "This is not a summoning. It's a fragment—half a ritual designed to locate residual hauntings, where a spirit's energy has anchored itself to the living world. It will draw you toward the echo of his presence, not his voice. You can *sense* him, perhaps even see traces, but that's all. Do you understand?" Syloki nodded quickly, too quickly. Lysandra's hand hovered over the parchment for a moment longer, as if reluctant to let go, then she added, "If you misuse it, it will not end kindly. The fragment isn't meant for conversation. It's meant for closure."

Syloki smiled, her expression all warmth and gratitude, though her voice came out a touch too bright, a note too smooth. "Of course. I wouldn't dream of crossing that line. You have my word, Lysandra." She reached out, her fingertips brushing the edge of the parchment as if it were something sacred. But beneath her calm exterior, her mind was already racing ahead—thinking of where she'd go, how she'd use it, and what questions she'd finally demand of the dead. Lysandra's gaze lingered on her for a long moment, long enough to see the flicker of deceit in her eyes, but she said nothing. Maybe she knew the lie. Maybe she chose to let it pass, knowing the kind of woman Syloki was. Either way, she only spoke again once Syloki had slipped the paper into her coat pocket and turned toward the stairs.

"Promise me something," Lysandra said quietly, her voice echoing through the low-lit chamber like a soft curse. Syloki paused, glancing back over her shoulder, her silhouette caught in the doorway's blue light. "If you find him," Lysandra continued, her tone cold and slow, "don't let him find you first." The warning sat heavy in the air between them, a sentence that clung like the scent of burnt wax. Syloki didn't answer with words this time—only a nod, brief and unreadable, before she disappeared up the stairwell. The door creaked open, and the mist of Crow's Ward spilled in like breath from another world. As she stepped into the fog-drenched street, the chill settled over her shoulders like an omen. Behind her, Lysandra moved around the table in silence, extinguishing the candles one by one. Each flame hissed as it died, and the final wisp of smoke curled upward through the dark—shifting, stretching, until it almost formed the shape of a grin that lingered in the air long after the light was gone.

The fog outside rolled low over the cobblestones, turning the lamplight into dull, trembling halos that swayed with every passing gust. Just at the corner, where Syloki had told her to wait, Sheila stood with her arms crossed tight against her chest, her breath fogging faintly in the cold air. The dim light caught the edge of her pale hair, giving her an almost spectral look as she shifted anxiously from foot to foot. When she saw Syloki emerge from the stairwell's shadow, her posture straightened immediately, tension melting into visible relief. "How was it, Sy?" she asked, her voice carrying the faint crackle of nerves beneath its usual brightness. "Did you get what you want?" Syloki didn't answer right away—she just drew in a deep breath, the kind that filled her lungs with damp air and coal smoke, her eyes still glancing back over her shoulder as though the darkness behind her might follow. "Yeah, kinda," she said at last, exhaling slowly through her nose. "I don't know, blue-eyes. She refused to do it there for me, but she gave me another way."

Sheila frowned immediately, the light in her eyes dimming as her brow knit tighter. "I'm getting a bad feeling about this, Sy," she said, her tone quieter now, her words heavy with that rare kind of seriousness that didn't suit her usual carefree expression. "What are you looking for? Why can't I know it?" Syloki stopped in the middle of the narrow street, her boots scraping faintly against the wet stone as she turned to face her. Her gaze softened a little at the sight of Sheila's concern, but there was a wall behind her eyes—something locked away too deep to reach. "You can't," she said gently, her tone half-apologetic, half-firm. "Just not now, okay? I'll tell you eventually, but this is a bit… private." The last word lingered, carrying weight beyond its surface

meaning, and Sheila's expression faltered. She bit her lower lip, hard enough to pale the skin, her gaze darting between Syloki's eyes as though searching for something she couldn't quite name.

The silence that fell between them was not an empty one—it buzzed with unease, the kind that fills the space between friends when one starts walking down a path the other cannot follow. Sheila shifted her weight, her jaw tightening, and then finally reached into the satchel slung over her shoulder. "Just be careful," she said quietly, the words more plea than instruction. She drew out a small, leather-bound volume, its cover embossed with faint runes that glimmered when the foglight hit them. "Here's the book of enchantments that you asked for." The edges were worn, the pages thick with use, and the faint scent of charmed ink drifted off it. Syloki hesitated before taking it, her fingers brushing against Sheila's for the briefest second. Her voice softened into something almost fond, though her eyes still carried that distant glint of obsession. "Thanks, girl," she said simply, tucking the book carefully inside her coat as though it were both weapon and promise.

Sheila studied her for a moment longer, her lips parted as if she wanted to say something else but couldn't find the words. Her hands fidgeted with the strap of her satchel, her thumb worrying a loose thread. Finally, she let out a sigh and looked away toward the mist rolling down the street, her voice small when it came. "Be careful, okay?" The concern in her tone cracked through the fog like the faintest echo of warmth in the cold. Syloki's answering smile was faint, one corner of her mouth quirking upward in that way she always did when she wanted to make something dangerous sound like a joke. "I'm always careful," she said, the irony tucked neatly into her voice, her eyes flicking briefly toward the shadows as though daring them to disagree.

The fog swallowed her figure as she turned to go, boots clicking softly against the cobblestones. Sheila watched her disappear into the dark until the sound faded completely, her expression drawn and uncertain. The street fell still again, save for the hum of a distant trolley and the whisper of mist curling between the lampposts. Somewhere behind her, deep within Lysandra's sanctum, the last traces of extinguished candles were still unraveling into thin grey threads that drifted toward the ceiling—each wisp twisting, reshaping, until for an instant they seemed to grin before vanishing entirely into the night.

Syloki walked with her coat drawn close to her neck, the fog curling and clutching around her boots like restless fingers, each step echoing with that hollow weight that follows when one is walking both toward and away from something. Her mind was fixed on the folded scrap Lysandra had given her, that fragment of ritual now tucked safely inside the lining of her coat like a secret heart still beating. It wasn't a summoning, at least not in the way she'd hoped. No voice, no face, no conversation through the veil—just a pull, a whisper in the bones pointing toward where the spirit still clung to the world. It was meant to locate the tether, not break it. But as she thought of it now, Syloki couldn't help but imagine how easily the line could blur. After all, what was the difference between finding a ghost and calling it closer? The air around her shimmered faintly, that soft hum that came when the fragment began to stir, its sigil warming against her chest in an almost living rhythm. She thought of Lysandra's words—"They are ideas that learned how to scream"—and shivered despite the layers of fabric.

The ritual itself was deceptively simple in theory, maddening in execution. A chalk circle drawn under moonlight, a strand of hair burned to ash, a drop of her own blood pressed to the page. The sigil reacted to traces of death's residue, feeding on what lingered in places where the veil had once been torn. The older the haunting, the fainter the pull—unless the death had been violent. Then the world remembered. Then it never forgot. Syloki's thoughts tumbled through the steps as she walked, her boots brushing through shallow puddles that reflected the yellow glow

of distant lamps. She'd studied enough to know that Lysandra's fragment wasn't just a tool; it was a doorway with a lock half-broken, and she was already turning the handle. She muttered under her breath as she traced the sigil's edge through the lining of her coat, feeling the faint vibration pulse like a heartbeat against her palm. It led her north, through Gloamhaven's ghost-lit avenues, where the gaslamps hissed and the scent of wet cobblestone hung heavy.

The fog rolled through the Gloamhaven streets like silk across a stage, smoothing every sharp line into a blur of dream and shadow. The open-air theatre waited for her just where the ritual had promised—half-hidden behind ivy-covered marble columns, sagging under the weight of time. Its iron gate hung ajar, one hinge broken, swaying lazily in the wind with a sound like a sigh too weary to finish. The world had forgotten this place. At night, no one came near; even the rats seemed to give it a wide berth. Locals whispered of strange laughter, of music with no players, of faces glimpsed behind curtains that no longer stood. Syloki found that comforting. The living's fear was her sanctuary—it kept the curious out. She stepped through the gate, her boots crunching against shards of glass and wilted petals, the remnants of some long-rotted offering. The air here was heavier, pressed down by memory.

The burned smell came first. It slithered out of the cracks in the wood and the gaps between the stones, subtle at first, then unmistakable. Not the sharp bite of something newly charred, but the deep, lingering scent of ash that had soaked into the bones of the building and never left. Despite the dampness of the rain-soaked night, the stench clung stubbornly to the air, the ghost of fire that refused to die. Syloki crouched near one of the fallen beams, dragging her fingers lightly across the blackened surface, and the soot stained her gloves. "Still smells like death," she muttered under her breath, though there was no fear in her tone—only quiet fascination. She knew enough of spirits to understand that scent was more than memory. When death by fire marked a place, the air itself learned to remember the burn. The smell wasn't from the world of the living anymore—it was residue, a sign that something still held fast to the moment it died.

She stood again, pulling the book Sheila had given her from her satchel, its leather cover damp and cool against her palms. The pages fluttered in the breeze as if restless, the faint shimmer of runes catching what little moonlight bled through the fog. Syloki leaned against the stage's broken railing, flipping through the familiar sigils, her lips moving in rhythm with the old words she whispered to herself, testing their shape in the air. "Elkarum vistra… ivun kedh…" she murmured softly, her voice steady but low, the syllables stretching and fading into the mist like smoke. Her fingers traced another phrase, one she'd marked with ink at the corner of the page: "Serrim vazhkar…" Each incantation felt different in her mouth—one like a key, another like a knife. She was practicing the words not just for memory, but for mastery, as though saying them aloud might make them her own before she dared to use them for real.

She closed the book gently, pressing her hand against the cover as though sealing the words inside. The fog had thickened now, wrapping around the theater like a curtain waiting to rise. The sigil on the fragment glowed faintly beneath her coat, reacting to something ahead, pulsing once, twice, like the echo of a distant heartbeat. She could feel it calling her toward the stage—the center of it all. Her pulse quickened, but her steps were steady as she crossed the courtyard and ascended the warped wooden steps. The air grew colder with every breath. Somewhere behind her, a crow let out a low, mournful cry before taking flight, its wings scattering the mist in spiraling ribbons. Syloki looked down at the fragment again, the faint blue light reflecting in her eyes like the shimmer of a soul caught between worlds. "Alright," she whispered to herself, voice calm but laced with anticipation. "Let's see where you're hiding, Mister Smile."

The stage loomed before her like a slumbering corpse, all its former grace stripped down to bones and ruin. The ivy that crawled up its marble columns had long since turned brittle, its tendrils blackened and crisp from years of neglect. Every shadow clung too tightly, every echo

lingered too long, and the silence between them was too deliberate, as if the air itself was holding its breath. Syloki crouched by the entrance, pulling from her coat a small glass orb bound with silver wire. With a sharp twist of her wrist, the faint hiss of electroplasm filled the air, and the orb flared to life—its pale green ghostlight washing over the ruined stage in trembling hues. The world changed color, painted in haunting greens and drowned silvers. The cracked boards gleamed like wet bone, and for a fleeting moment, she could almost imagine the applause of a long-dead crowd, the shimmer of velvet curtains, the echo of laughter caught between rafters. The air tasted of ash and old perfume—sweet, then sour—and when she breathed too deep, it made her throat sting like she had swallowed smoke.

She moved slowly, tracing the edges of the stage with the care of someone stepping across a graveyard. Her boots whispered against the splintered boards, the sound so faint it seemed swallowed before it reached her own ears. The fog swirled low at her knees, disturbed by her movement, and with it came the faintest rustle, a sigh of something unseen just beyond her reach. The sensation prickled across her skin, that cold awareness that she was no longer alone. A breeze slipped past her cheek—not cold, not warm, just wrong—and for a moment, the fine hairs at the back of her neck rose like a warning. “It’s just air,” she muttered softly, though her voice carried no conviction. At the stage’s heart, the boards had warped and cracked, bowing inward like ribs caving around an old wound. Her eyes flicked down to the fragment’s sigil—it was glowing stronger here, pulsing against her coat with a faint vibration that thrummed through her bones. She knew she’d found it.

Syloki knelt, setting the orb beside her so that the light pooled in a halo across the warped floor. She pressed her hands against the old wood, fingers seeking purchase against grooves slick with time, and pried. The panel groaned but held fast, the old nails shrieking faintly as they resisted. “Oh, come on,” she hissed under her breath, bracing one boot against the edge for leverage. With a grunt, she pushed again, the strain running up her arm, her gloves scraping uselessly against the splintered planks. The panel finally gave a little, creaking upward just enough for her to wedge her fingers underneath. She yanked, cursed, then yanked again, her knuckles raking against the coarse edge. It took her three more tries and the muttered string of every foul word she knew before the board finally ripped free, snapping backward with a sharp crack that echoed through the theater like a gunshot. The sound sent her heart slamming against her ribs. For a moment, she froze, half-expecting an answer in the dark—whispers, movement, anything—but the silence stayed.

The gap she’d opened was narrow and filled with damp earth, packed hard by decades of neglect. She reached into her satchel, fumbling for anything sharp, but came up only with a dull pry-knife she used for locks and an iron file she’d forgotten she had. “Damn it, Syloki,” she muttered to herself, her tone halfway between scolding and disbelief. “Be prepared, why don’t you?” She jammed the file into the dirt, using it like a crude shovel, and began to dig. The soil was stubborn, slick with moisture, and reeked faintly of rot. Every handful she scooped free smeared black mud up her arms, sticking to the creases in her gloves. Her muscles burned from the awkward angle, her breath coming in short bursts that clouded the air. The deeper she dug, the more the dirt resisted, clinging as though it didn’t want to give up what it was hiding. She hit something solid once—wood or bone, she couldn’t tell—and kept going until her fingertips brushed leather.

When she finally cleared enough space to see it properly, she stopped, panting. A trunk lay buried beneath the stage’s heart, half-rotted and slick with grime. Its leather was cracked like dry skin, the metal corners dulled to green with corrosion, and the initials stamped on its surface—M.S.—peeked faintly through the muck like the ghost of a signature. She pressed her palm against it, feeling the cold through the glove, and knew instantly that this was it. “Found you,” she whispered. She hooked her hands beneath the edge and pulled. It didn’t budge. The mud had sealed it in place like concrete, and each tug only seemed to pull the breath from her

lungs. She dug deeper around it, using her knife now to loosen the sides, nails scraping through the wet soil until they ached beneath her gloves. Her knees were soaked, her shoulders screaming with effort, but she refused to stop. She braced her legs, gritted her teeth, and heaved. The trunk shifted—barely, grudgingly—but the sound it made was enough to feed her determination.

With one last guttural curse, she threw her weight backward and dragged the damned thing free, tumbling onto her side as it came loose with a wet, sucking sound that sent mud splattering across her face and coat. She sat there for a moment, chest heaving, strands of hair stuck to her cheek, the ghostlight flickering beside her as if reacting to her pulse. The trunk sat before her like a dark wound pulled from the earth, old and ugly and breathing secrets into the damp night air. She wiped the sweat and dirt from her brow, smearing it into streaks, then crouched again to examine the lock. Rust had eaten most of it, but the latch still clung stubbornly, sealed tight. She drew her knife and wedged it in, twisting hard, the metal whining in protest. It didn't give. She tried again, jamming the blade deeper, using the heel of her hand to hammer it forward. The knife slipped, slicing her glove open, and she cursed aloud, flinging it aside. The pain stung but barely registered over the frustration boiling in her chest. She pressed her forehead against the trunk's edge, exhaling hard. "Not tonight," she muttered, her voice hoarse. Then she grabbed the iron file again, her jaw set in defiance. "You're opening one way or another."

It took her another full minute of muttered curses, iron scraping, and the dull rhythm of metal striking metal before the latch finally gave. The sound was not a clean snap but a wet, reluctant groan, like something old and resentful being woken from its grave. The trunk's lid creaked open just enough to let out a breath of stale air that smelled faintly of rot and greasepaint, of velvet dust and old dreams that had long since curdled into nightmares. Syloki froze, half-disbelieving, then let out a laugh so loud and raw it startled even her. "Ha! Finally!" she exclaimed, voice bouncing off the crumbling walls in reckless victory before dying into an awkward hush. The weight of the silence that followed reminded her of where she stood, and her grin faltered into a tight, sheepish smirk. "Alright," she muttered under her breath, lowering her voice, "maybe not so loud." She leaned closer, the ghostlight orb flickering beside her shoulder, casting rippling light over the contents inside. What she saw made her breath catch mid-laugh.

Inside lay velvet wraps dulled to gray with age, makeup kits with cracked mirrors and pigments turned to dust, brushes that had stiffened into brittle relics of long-dead glamour. The air above the open trunk shimmered faintly, like heat rising from a forge, but the scent was wrong—sweet, almost perfumed, undercut by something metallic. She shifted the ghostlight, its glow sliding across a layer of worn sketches scattered beneath the fabrics. They were drawings of faces—dozens of them—each one warped by exaggeration. Eyes stretched too wide, smiles too deep, cheeks twisted into impossible shapes that seemed to mock her even in stillness. These weren't masks for disguise. They were masks for transformation. For creation of something other. Syloki's stomach turned as she lifted one sketch, tracing the outline of a face that was both human and not, the expression carved in that unsettling middle ground between joy and agony. Beneath the sketches, sealed tight in wax paper that had gone yellow with time, lay something heavier. She peeled the edges apart with trembling fingers, and the faint crackle of old paper filled the room.

It was a mask. The light caught on its smooth surface, showing the pale gleam of something neither plaster nor bone. Its lips were carved into a smile far too wide to be human, the curve of it so sharp it almost hurt to look at. The eyeholes were hollow, empty, and yet they seemed to stare back at her with the patience of something that had seen too much. Syloki's fingers hovered above it for a long moment before she dared to touch it, and when she did, the material was cold—too cold, like the chill that comes from a grave even after years of burial. Her pulse thudded in her throat, each beat slower than the last, heavy with that eerie certainty that what

she held was not an object but a remnant of intent. As she stared into its hollow eyes, the thought slithered unbidden through her mind—not a thought, but a knowing—that this mask had belonged to someone who had understood Merrow Valesque far too well. A distant giggle echoed from the back row of the ruined seats, high-pitched and breathless, like a child's laugh carried on the wind.

Syloki shot to her feet, the mask in one hand, her ghost-charm in the other, the small metal talisman pressed so tight into her palm it bit into her skin. The sound of her own breathing filled her ears, ragged and sharp against the heavy stillness. "Alright," she whispered to the empty theater, her voice trembling between defiance and unease. "Show me what's so damn funny." Her words hung in the air and didn't come back. The shadows shifted in answer. A flicker of movement danced across the far wall—too quick to follow, too slow to dismiss—and when she turned, the ghostlight in her hand dimmed, sputtering as if afraid to shine too brightly here. The air thickened in her lungs, growing heavier, the silence no longer just absence but presence—something listening. Something waiting. She forced herself to look back toward the trunk, her pulse hammering. Beneath the scraps of costume and the leering mask lay something else—a weathered leather journal, its cover cracked like old paint, its corners darkened with what looked like soot.

Syloki hesitated only a heartbeat before reaching down, her fingers brushing over the embossed initials: *M.S.* "Mister Smile…" she murmured, the name coming out as both curse and confirmation. She flipped the book open with care, each page groaning softly as if reluctant to be read. The handwriting inside was wild, slanted, letters clawing at the paper in manic loops that made her eyes strain to follow. Ink bled through the pages, smeared by ash, water, or perhaps hands that trembled too much. She skimmed the entries, her lips moving silently over the fragments that stood out amid the chaos. "He comes to me with ideas. Faces for a final performance. 'Make them laugh,' he says. 'Make them scream. It's all the same in the end.'" Her brow furrowed as she turned the page, her eyes flicking from line to line. "Merrow visited again. Said he had a part for me to play. He always brings the best faces…" The further she read, the tighter her grip on the journal became. "She used to come too. Quiet at first. Then sharper. She stopped smiling before he did." Another page, the ink smeared by what looked like a fingerprint dragged through ash: "She said the audience wouldn't understand. But they don't need to understand, they only need to feel."

Her heart thudded faster as the words grew stranger, darker. "The final show draws near. I must finish the masks. One for each child. One for each scream." Her mouth went dry at the next passage. "Merrow laughs louder than the fire. He laughs because she told him to." And finally, near the end, written in shaky, fading ink that barely clung to the page: "The show's nearly over. I see it now. But I must hold the curtain. If I let it fall… she might remember what she left in the fire." Syloki's stomach turned, the words swimming in front of her eyes. Her fingers tightened around the book, her knuckles white. The smell of ash seemed to thicken in the air, choking her, as if the fire these pages described was still burning somewhere unseen. "What the hell were you making?" she whispered, her voice almost lost to the dark. And somewhere in the distance, the echo of that giggle came again—closer this time, softer, almost tender.

Syloki descended the steps stage-left, the boards creaking beneath her weight like reluctant sighs. Each step felt heavier than the one before, her boots leaving faint prints in the dust that had gathered thick as snow. The air here felt different—charged, weighted, the kind of stillness that hums against your ribs before thunder breaks. She followed the curve of the platform with slow, deliberate movements, every sense stretched taut. Her instincts hummed like a tuning fork—this wasn't just another ruin left to rot beneath Doskvol's fog. This place had purpose, the air itself steeped in reverence and ruin. The sigil under her coat burned faintly against her ribs as though in warning, but she pressed on, drawn forward by something older than curiosity. That's when she saw it—center stage, beneath the shredded folds of a once-luxurious velvet

curtain that now hung like the corpse of a memory. A mask. Nailed into the boards. Its white surface gleamed faintly in the ghostlight, its edges warped by the kiss of fire.

It wasn't paper. Not cloth. Porcelain—fired smooth and delicate, but warped along one side, melted into a twisted curl that made it seem half-alive. Its mouth stretched into a fixed grin, a smile carved too deep, too wide, the edges cracked and turned upward as though whoever had shaped it had never known the difference between laughter and agony. Syloki's breath hitched as she approached, her hand slipping into her coat pocket, closing around the stub of chalk she kept there. The ghostlight cast the mask in a pale shimmer that flickered each time her heart beat faster. It hadn't been there before. She knew it hadn't. But as she stared at it now, its edges seemed so perfectly settled in the dust, as though it had been waiting for her all along. Her eyes darted over the nail that pinned it—blackened by age but pulsing faintly with a thin, sickly aura. Warding? Binding? Her fingers hovered above it, the air between skin and metal buzzing faintly, alive with the residue of old, cracked magic. It felt like a breath—one that had never been exhaled.

She closed her eyes for a heartbeat, trying to recall everything the Sisters had ever said about hauntings of this depth. Spirits could do this—manifest echoes of what they'd once touched. The stronger the emotion, the deeper the wound, the more the world itself remembered. She thought of the maskmaker's journal, of laughter and screams stitched together like patchwork. Could a spirit create something like this? Manifest its obsession until the boundary between memory and object ceased to matter? Her mind raced, every lesson she'd ever learned on spectral energy clashing with the chill clawing up her spine. She crouched closer, brushing her fingers over the floorboards, feeling the faint warmth radiating from the wood despite the freezing air. That was the tell—something had been here. Something still was. The thought barely had time to settle before the air shifted.

Cold. Not natural cold—no, this was the kind that came from nowhere, the kind that made the world fold inward on itself. Her breath fogged instantly, curling in front of her lips like smoke. The boards creaked behind her, soft but deliberate. She didn't move at first, listening, every nerve in her body alight. The sound came again—weight shifting across the stage, slow, dragging, like someone pacing just out of sight. Syloki rose in one motion, the journal tucked under her arm, her other hand clutching the charm tight. She stepped backward into the aisle's shadow, her heart hammering so loudly she feared it might answer her for her. The ghostlight flickered once, twice, then steadied—but its glow had changed, thinner now, as if the light itself was holding its breath. The theater was utterly silent, but in that silence was something waiting to happen.

And then it began. The laughter. At first, soft, distant, like a memory bleeding through time. The sound came from the balcony, high and thin—the laughter of children playing far, far away. Syloki froze, the hair on her arms lifting as the echo threaded through the fog. It came again, closer this time, overlapping voices giggling in wild delight. She should have been relieved by the sound of life, but this was wrong. It was too bright, too rehearsed. The pitch of it climbed, teetering between joy and hysteria, until the giggles cracked and warped. Beneath the laughter, she began to hear something else. Screams—faint at first, buried beneath the mirth—but there. The laughter twisted around them, swallowing their terror whole. Joy and agony bleeding together until they were indistinguishable.

More voices joined in, laughter spilling from the wings, echoing through the aisles. It filled the theater like smoke, thick and suffocating. Syloki turned toward the sound just as the first figures appeared—faint, translucent shapes rising from the boards like steam from water. Ghostly children, their forms hazy, eyes bright and hollow. A little girl twirled in a singed dress, the hem fluttering with embers that never died. A boy followed, chasing her with arms outstretched, both laughing as fire licked at their heels. Syloki's chest clenched as she watched the flames trail behind them like ribbons. And then, through the smoke of memory, a figure emerged at center

stage. A man—or something wearing the shape of one—dancing with deliberate grace. His movements were theatrical, exaggerated, each step punctuated by a flourish of his hands. The porcelain mask on his face gleamed pale in the ghostlight, the same impossible grin she'd just unearthed. He bowed low, arm sweeping wide in a showman's gesture, and behind him, the world collapsed in flame. A carnival façade melted into cinders, horses burning, laughter twisting into madness as rides crumbled to ash. And through it all, the masked figure danced, smiling as though he had finally found the perfect audience.

Syloki's grip on her ghost-charm tightened until the metal cut into her palm, grounding her with pain. Her other hand slipped into her coat, fingers curling around the hilt of her knife, the weight of it both comfort and promise. She stood still, her pulse pounding in her ears as the air thickened around her. Onstage, the phantoms began their show. One by one, they emerged from the walls—thin, twitching silhouettes caught halfway between life and whatever waited beyond it. Their movements were jerky, like marionettes pulled by strings made of smoke, their faces flickering in and out of focus as if time itself couldn't decide which moment to trap them in. Syloki's stomach turned as she realized what she was watching—she knew this story, she had read about it in the archives, heard whispers in the underworld, traced it through the reports of charred bones found in the ashes of a carnival long gone. Barrowcleft. The day the amusement park burned. She had thought she was ready for it. But nothing could prepare her for the sight of ghosts reenacting their own deaths.

The carousel turned first, its wooden horses reduced to cracked silhouettes, their painted grins distorted into masks of horror as they spun endlessly in the ghostlight. The painted eyes wept streaks of melted color. A small boy laughed from the ticket booth, his face stretching unnaturally wide until the edges split, mouth twisting into a grotesque parody of joy. Somewhere to the right, a fire-breather performed, his torch flaring too bright, the air warping around him as if the world itself were holding its breath before breaking. Syloki's voice caught in her throat. She wanted to look away but couldn't. Each step of the ghosts' performance drew her deeper into their doom. The fire breather turned—and his torch ignited the air, tracing the lines of the rigged gas pipes hidden beneath the stage. Flames leapt like serpents through the beams, hungry, eager. And at the center of it all, stepping forward with a dancer's grace, was the masked man.

His porcelain face gleamed in the unnatural light, the grin painted wide and wrong, edges curled upward in mockery of humanity. His suit, singed at the cuffs, moved like silk even as phantom flames licked at the fabric. His hands jerked as he danced, puppet-like, each motion violent in its elegance. He twirled, bowed, gestured to the crowd that wasn't there. Merrow Valesque—or the ghost of what he had become in the minds of those who died by his stage. Syloki's heart froze as she realized the truth: this wasn't a man. This was memory sculpted into nightmare. This was how the children remembered him in the instant before they burned. "This isn't real," she whispered, voice cracking against the rising laughter. "This is just what's left." But even as she said it, she felt the heat on her skin, the smoke in her lungs, the roar of fire like applause. The masked man spun again, arms flung wide as the children laughed—and then the laughter broke, their joy collapsing into screams that didn't come from mouths but from the marrow of their being. Syloki staggered backward, trembling. "This isn't just memory," she breathed. "It's a ritual. A trap still playing on a loop."

Her fingers moved on instinct, sketching a sigil into the air with trembling precision. Sheila's voice echoed faintly in her mind, reminding her of the chant—a whisper of clarity, something to strip illusion bare. "Elkarum vistra. Let what's hidden be seen." The air rippled around her, distorting like glass in heat. For a heartbeat, the illusion peeled away, revealing something far worse beneath. The ghosts froze mid-motion, their forms flickering to charred bones and melted skin. The flames turned from bright orange to a sickly green hue, whispering secrets through the smoke. Syloki saw it clearly now—the gas lines slashed, not broken. The exit doors chained shut. The crowd trapped, the laughter forced. The fire had not been an accident. It had been

written, choreographed, rehearsed. “It was a performance,” she whispered, her stomach twisting. “A sacrifice dressed as a show.” And then, from behind her, close enough to stir the hair by her ear, a voice hissed, cold and jagged as glass: “He smiled as they screamed. He smiled for her.”

Syloki spun, knife drawn, breath catching in her chest—but there was nothing there. Only her own shadow, stretched long across the boards, the shape of it rippling as if it too were alive. The stage was empty. The children were gone. The carousel had stopped turning. The green light sputtered, died, and the dark folded over her like a curtain falling after the final act. She stood alone, shaking, the journal clutched tight against her chest, her lungs dragging in ragged breaths that hurt on the way out. “Lira burned him out of her paintings,” she muttered, voice thin in the vast silence. “But he burned something worse into the city. And someone helped him.” She looked down at the mask still nailed to the floor, her reflection bending across its cracked smile. “Why did you do it?” she whispered. “For her… or because of her?” The theater did not answer. The shadows merely shifted, waiting.

She drew in one last breath and whispered again, “Elkarum vistra… ivun kedh…” The syllables trembled off her tongue, their power prickling against her teeth. “Show me what’s real.” The silence broke—not softly, but with a voice so immediate, so close, it made her blood run cold. “He smiled as they screamed. He smiled for her.” Syloki turned sharply, knife raised. A figure stood center stage now, drawn from the mask itself, his body rising like smoke solidifying into flesh. He was half-spectral, half-real, his shape flickering between the living and the dead. His skin shifted like wax under flame, faces forming and melting, unable to hold their shape. His rags hung heavy with soot, streaked with colors that might once have been makeup. His eyes leaked shadow. “Who are you?” Syloki demanded, her voice low, steady despite the tremor in her hands. The figure tilted his head, then bowed low, his grin widening as if it might split his skull. “I was Mister Smile,” he said, his tone lilting between laughter and sob. “The maskmaker. The showrunner. The finale designer.” His smile cracked. “I gave them all their roles. The Jack. The Queen. The King. And the Fool.” Syloki took a slow step forward, her eyes narrowing. “You made the masks for the Royal Family?” His laugh came wet and broken, a sound like shattered glass dragged across stone. “I made them,” he said. “Merrow… he only wore what I carved. But the truth?” His smile twitched wider, trembling. “He smiled for her. Everything was for her.”

“For Lira?” Syloki asked, her words a whisper that still managed to echo through the hollow theater. The ghost stopped laughing. The silence that followed was so sharp it felt like a blade pressed to her throat. Then he began again—giggles that broke into sobs, laughter spilling from his mouth like blood from a wound. “She burned him first,” he crooned, voice splintering between grief and glee. “So he burned it all.” The words struck her chest like a blow. And then the air shifted again, the ghost’s laughter turning from sound to pressure, a force that pulsed through her skull. He lunged, and before Syloki could even raise her knife, black claws of shadow sliced through her mind. Her body remained standing, frozen mid-breath, but her consciousness was thrown backward, spiraling into fire. The stage vanished. The ghosts vanished. And when her eyes opened again, she was standing in his place—laughing, as flames clawed their way up her sleeves.

She was Merrow—laughing as the world burned. The sound tore from her throat, raw and uncontrollable, as fire crawled up her sleeves and kissed her skin like a lover she could not escape. The laughter wasn’t hers—it was his, a sound that came from somewhere deep and vile, echoing through her skull until it became all there was. Then the world shifted, and she was Lira—standing at the edge of the carousel, her face illuminated by the rising flames. Her lips trembled, eyes wide and glassy, watching the painted horses twist into molten nightmares. The laughter was gone now, replaced by the brittle sound of sobbing swallowed by fire. Then again, it changed—she was small, terrified, trapped. A child in the hall of mirrors, pounding on glass that reflected her own fear back a thousandfold. Her throat was raw from screaming, her tiny

fists bloody from trying to break free. The smell of ash and perfume filled her lungs until she could no longer tell if she was breathing smoke or memory. *No, no, no—get out, get out*— her thoughts shattered inside her head, breaking apart like glass underfoot. And then, through the inferno, through the screams that weren't hers, came a voice that was.

"Syloki!" The sound cut through the haze like a blade. For a heartbeat she couldn't tell if it came from the memory or the world beyond, but then she saw it—a flash of white light, real light, searing through the illusion. Her eyes darted toward it, and the fire flickered, retreating just enough to show a shape at the edge of the smoke. Sheila. The light was hers—a ghostlight lantern shaking in her trembling hand. Syloki's body convulsed as the illusion broke. She fell to her knees, gasping, the world reeling around her as she clutched her temples. Her heart felt like it was clawing its way out of her chest. Sheila stumbled toward her, face pale, breathing hard. "I followed you," she said, voice ragged and shaking. "You weren't answering from afar—I thought—Gods, Syloki, are you alright?" Syloki opened her mouth, but no sound came out, just a broken breath. Her eyes darted around wildly, searching for something that still made sense. Her gaze locked on Sheila's face—and dread twisted in her gut. *Is that really her?*

The ghost moved first. Its laugh cracked the air, shrill and hungry. It turned toward Sheila, its shifting form drawing itself up into a mass of flickering shadow. "Pretender!" it screamed, the voice breaking apart into overlapping tones—man and woman, joy and hatred—until it was nothing but noise. "She stole the wrong face! This isn't hers! This was never hers!" Its body convulsed, jerking like a puppet with too many strings, and then it lunged, a blur of teeth and shadow. Sheila screamed, stumbling back as the ghost's claws slashed through the air, scattering sparks of spectral energy. Syloki's instincts took over. Her mind was still fractured, her pulse erratic, but her training cut through the fog like reflex. She fumbled at her belt, found the last spirit bottle, and hurled it into the circle she'd drawn hours earlier in faint chalk. The bottle shattered, glass and vapor exploding outward in a surge of sapphire light. The sigil ignited instantly, searing across the floor in a perfect ring. The energy hit her chest like thunder, knocking the air from her lungs.

"Serrim vazhkar!" she shouted, her voice raw but commanding. The word tore itself from her throat, the banishment taking hold. The ghost shrieked, the sound scraping against the inside of her skull. It struck the barrier again and again, its claws carving trails of black smoke into the glowing dome. Its face split, reformed, split again—Merrow's laughter flashing through it, Lira's weeping eyes bleeding into its shape, then her own reflection smiling back at her from the distortion. Syloki gritted her teeth, forcing the sigil to hold. "Serrim vazhkar!" she cried again, pushing against the rising pressure. The ghost writhed, its form fracturing under the force, leaking shadow and light in jagged bursts. "You want to know why she hates him?" it gasped, voice unraveling into static. Its eyes, if they could still be called that, found Syloki's. "Ask her what she left behind in the fire." Then, with one last broken scream, the entity shattered, scattering into a rain of embered ash that faded before it touched the floor.

The silence that followed was complete. The kind that swallows everything. Only the faint smell of burnt paper lingered in the air, heavy and choking. The sigil dimmed, its glow receding into the floorboards until there was nothing left but blackened chalk and the faint tremor in Syloki's hands. She turned slowly, vision swimming. Sheila was on her knees, her lantern sputtering beside her, eyes wide and terrified. "Syloki…" she whispered, voice small. "What was that thing?" Syloki stared at the space where the ghost had been, unable to answer. The air still felt wrong, warped. Finally, she spoke, her voice hoarse. "I don't know," she said quietly. "But it knew everything." She looked down at her hand, at the faint burn where the ghostlight had flared, and felt the weight of what it meant. The mask. The fire. Lira. None of it was finished.

She didn't say it aloud, but the thought anchored deep in her chest, cold and certain: she wasn't done with this. Not until Lira Quinval told her exactly what had burned in Barrowcleft—and why it

still screamed. The fog outside shifted against the broken windows, curling inward like fingers reaching for the stage. Syloki closed her eyes, breathing slow, trying to steady the tremor that refused to leave her hands. The taste of ash still coated her tongue, and somewhere, faintly, she thought she heard a laugh echo through the dark. Not a ghost's laugh this time, but something else—something remembering her name.

The manor welcomed her back with shadows and silence. The heavy doors groaned as they closed behind her, their echo crawling through the empty hallways like a sigh that refused to fade. The scent of incense and old dust filled the air, clinging to the fabric of her coat and the edges of her hair, as though even the building itself wanted to mark her return. The sconces along the corridor flickered with ghostlight, pale blue tongues of flame dancing against the black marble walls, their trembling glow casting fractured silhouettes that moved when she did not. Every step Syloki took seemed too loud, the click of her boots reverberating through the hollow corridors, breaking the hush that hung like a heavy drape. It was the same manor, yes—the same cracked portraits, the same long rugs faded from centuries of footsteps—but Syloki felt something had shifted inside her. As though she had left something of herself behind in that theater, something she might never get back. The chill in her bones hadn't left since the firelight died. It sat deep in her chest, humming faintly beneath her ribs, whispering every time she tried to still her thoughts.

Her room was as she had left it: modest by Gloam standards, draped in curtains of deep violet and silver, a faint scent of myrrh drifting through the air from a burned-out candle on the mantel. She moved wordlessly through the space, shedding her cloak and hanging it beside the door, her movements slow and deliberate, as though the weight of every motion had doubled since she crossed the threshold. The small fireplace in the corner still held embers, dim and frail, but enough to spark when she coaxed them with the poker. The flame stuttered to life, weak and flickering like a nervous heartbeat. She crouched beside it, holding her hands close, letting the heat touch her fingertips while the rest of her remained cold. Across the room, Sheila leaned against the window frame, arms folded, her silhouette outlined against the fog-drenched streets below. The mist pressed thick against the glass, glowing faintly with the distant reflection of lanterns outside. Neither spoke. The silence between them wasn't strained—it was heavy, respectful, the kind that grows when words aren't enough to describe what both have seen.

Syloki broke it first. "Thanks for coming after me," she said, her voice low, carrying the faint tremor of exhaustion that sleep would not fix. Sheila didn't look away from the window at first. She exhaled softly, fogging the glass, then smiled over her shoulder—a small, sad smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Of course," she said quietly. "You'd have done the same for me." The words hung between them, fragile as glass. Syloki wanted to nod, to agree, to pretend that it was true. But a part of her hesitated. A part of her that had stood on that stage, knife in hand, wondering if what she saw was real or just another mask. The silence stretched again, the fire popping in the hearth, each sound amplified in the stillness. Sheila's gaze lingered on her for a heartbeat longer before she turned back to the fog, lost in her own thoughts. Syloki didn't press her. Some nights didn't need conversation. They just needed quiet.

When Sheila finally left, the door shut with a soft click, leaving Syloki alone with the faint crackle of the fire. The room seemed to exhale, shadows expanding into every corner as though relieved to have her to themselves again. She pulled the chair from the desk and sat heavily, her muscles aching with the memory of adrenaline. From her satchel, she retrieved the bundle wrapped in torn cloth—the remnants of Mister Smile's journal. The paper inside was brittle, edges blackened, pages warped from heat and ash. She spread them gently across the desk, fingertips trembling as she tried to flatten them without tearing the ink-blotted lines. The handwriting danced across the page in erratic loops, parts smeared into oblivion, others burned

so deep the paper itself had scarred. But some words survived. They bled through the ruin like voices that refused to die. She stopped smiling before he did. The phrase stared back at her, burned darker than the rest, as if the fire itself had chosen to preserve it.

She leaned back, staring into the flame. Her reflection flickered faintly in the window glass beside her—distorted, trembling, the ghost of a woman she barely recognized. The firelight shimmered across her eyes, pulling a faint, haunted glimmer from the shadows beneath them. Lira Quinval's face flashed through her mind—painted red lips, bright eyes turned cold, the same woman who had once built the Royal Family and then helped destroy it. The same woman who had burned Merrow out of her life and yet could never erase what he'd left behind. Syloki's thoughts spiraled like smoke, circling the question she feared to ask. Had Lira been the spark that twisted Merrow into the monster he became? Or had the monster already been there, just waiting for her to strike the match? The laughter from the theater still echoed faintly in her ears, its edges cruel and familiar, the sound of joy turned inside out. She closed her eyes, the weight of it pressing behind her ribs. Somewhere between the ash and the laughter, between truth and mask, the answer waited.

Outside, the fog thickened, wrapping the manor in a hush that seemed alive. The fire crackled, weak but persistent, throwing its small light against the dark. Syloki reached for the edge of one charred page and turned it slowly, watching as a fragment of ash broke off and drifted through the air before vanishing into the carpet. She knew this was far from over. The ghosts would not rest. Neither would the truth. Whether it was buried in the ruins of Barrowcleft or etched in the memories of a woman who refused to speak, the truth still screamed beneath the surface of this city. She would find it. Because beneath all the layers of laughter, beneath the masks and performances, there was a question waiting for her—a question she could no longer ignore. The real show hadn't started yet. And when it did, Syloki would be ready to pull the curtain herself.

Dramatis Personae & Factions at a Glance

The Cyphers

- **Arthur Xavier** — A Leech turned investigator, chasing secrets through chalk lines and smoke.
- **Silas Thorn** — A steady hand and loyal comrade, carrying the weight of lost brothers.
- **Lannic Morrow** — The Cyphers' sharp-minded leader, a craftsman of both machines and schemes.

Allies & Associates

- **Syloki** — A tracker whose path crosses Arthur's, walking the line between ally and enigma.
- **Sheila Crawford** — A bright soul within the Gloam Sisters' shadow, her warmth hiding secrets even she doesn't yet know.
- **Lysandra Grey** — A whisper-mage of calm menace, weaving truth from smoke and silence, her wisdom tempered by ghosts that never left her.

Powers & Adversaries

- **Merrow Valesque** — A phantom hand in Doskvol, twisting chaos into purpose.
- **Boquinha** — Lock-breaker, quick with his hands. Member of the Stoneborn orphans.
- **Cuzão** — Survivor, desperate runner bearing names. Stoneborn member.
- **Ember Circle** — aristocratic arsonists; Emberlash lights their sermons.
- **Lira Quinval** — Gloam matriarch; vengeance made flesh.
- **Emberwing** — A Circle agent, ruthless and feared, her name whispered like a spark in the dark.
- **Ulric Stoneborn** — Fierce Stoneborn orphan leader, born commander.
- **Crows** — Outlaws turned reluctant defenders, fighting for survival and reputation.

Places that Matter

- **Shadows' Den** — A haven of whispers where secrets change hands like coin.
- **The Twilight Lounge** — A velvet-curtained den of indulgence, where deals are struck in smoke.
- **The Black Marrow** — Pennwright's stronghold, half casino, half fortress of vice.
- **The Iron Den** — Orphanage-fort turned battlefield.

The Chapter List

Chapter 1: Echoes of Betrayal

At a clandestine gathering, Silas witnesses Adrian's brutal death, unable to intervene without dooming them both. Wracked with grief, he and Arthur struggle to process the betrayal and the threat of the Ladher weapon. Lannic vows vengeance, and suspicions rise that someone unseen is orchestrating a larger war in Doskvol.

Chapter 2: The Painted Widow

Syloki's uneasy induction into the Gloam Sisters turns into a night of terror when she and Sheila confront the vengeful spirit of the Painted Widow, a haunting performance that blurs grief, illusion, and possession.

Story: What Comes Next

In the smoky haze of the Twilight Lounge, Arthur drowns in grief while Syloki reaches across the silence with honesty, revealing her bond to the Gloam Sisters as both share the weight of loss and looming choices.

Chapter 3: Ash and Iron

Arthur leads his crew deep into Coalbridge's industrial shadows, uncovering the Circle's hidden stockpiles and zealotry. Amid smoke, steel, and blood, they find a darker truth: the Iron Den orphanage has been marked for fire.

Chapter 4: The Orphan's War

Amid a city set ablaze by the Ember Circle, Arthur and his allies race to defend the Iron Den orphanage. In the firestorm, they uncover Merrow Valesque's true plan—a prison break masked by chaos. What begins as a rescue becomes the spark of a wider war that Doskvol can no longer escape.

News: Fires of Chaos – The Day Horror Descended on Ashvale

An in-world article dissecting the Ashvale attacks, prison break, and the return of Merrow's lieutenants.

Chapter 05: Whispers in Vida Nova

Syloki and Sheila visit the newly opened Hotel Vida Nova under the guise of an inspection, only to uncover hidden tensions. Their probing questions quickly spiral into violence when attackers storm the lobby, forcing Syloki to face violence. In the aftermath, she realizes Merrow's shadow is stirring again, his reach stretching further than she feared.

Chapter 06: The Rabbit's Path

Syloki follows the Sisters into the ruins of the Crimson Chemical Plant, where whispers of the White Rabbit lead to a nightmare of hallucinations and violence. Caught between Merrow's shadow and Lira's fury, she faces visions that tear at her deepest fears while the battlefield erupts in chaos. In the end, survival comes at a cost, leaving Syloki shaken, laughing through pain, and uncertain of the path still ahead.

Chapter 7: Between Masks

In the smoke-lit hush of the Twilight Lounge, Arthur and Syloki trade secrets, suspicions, and scars beneath the lull of jazz and whiskey. What begins as an exchange of intelligence becomes something far more revealing: two weary minds unmasking just enough truth to see each other clearly. Beneath the quiet, unspoken confessions flicker—dangerous, human, and impossible to take back.

Chapter 8: The Smiling One

Arthur meets with Ulric Stoneborn to bargain for the Blackwood twins' location, only to uncover whispers of a creature that wears human skin. Later, as "The Watchman," he confronts Viero—a masked informant whose body defies death. In the fog's silence, Arthur realizes Doskvol's myths are waking, and one of them is already smiling.

Chapter 9: Barrowcleft

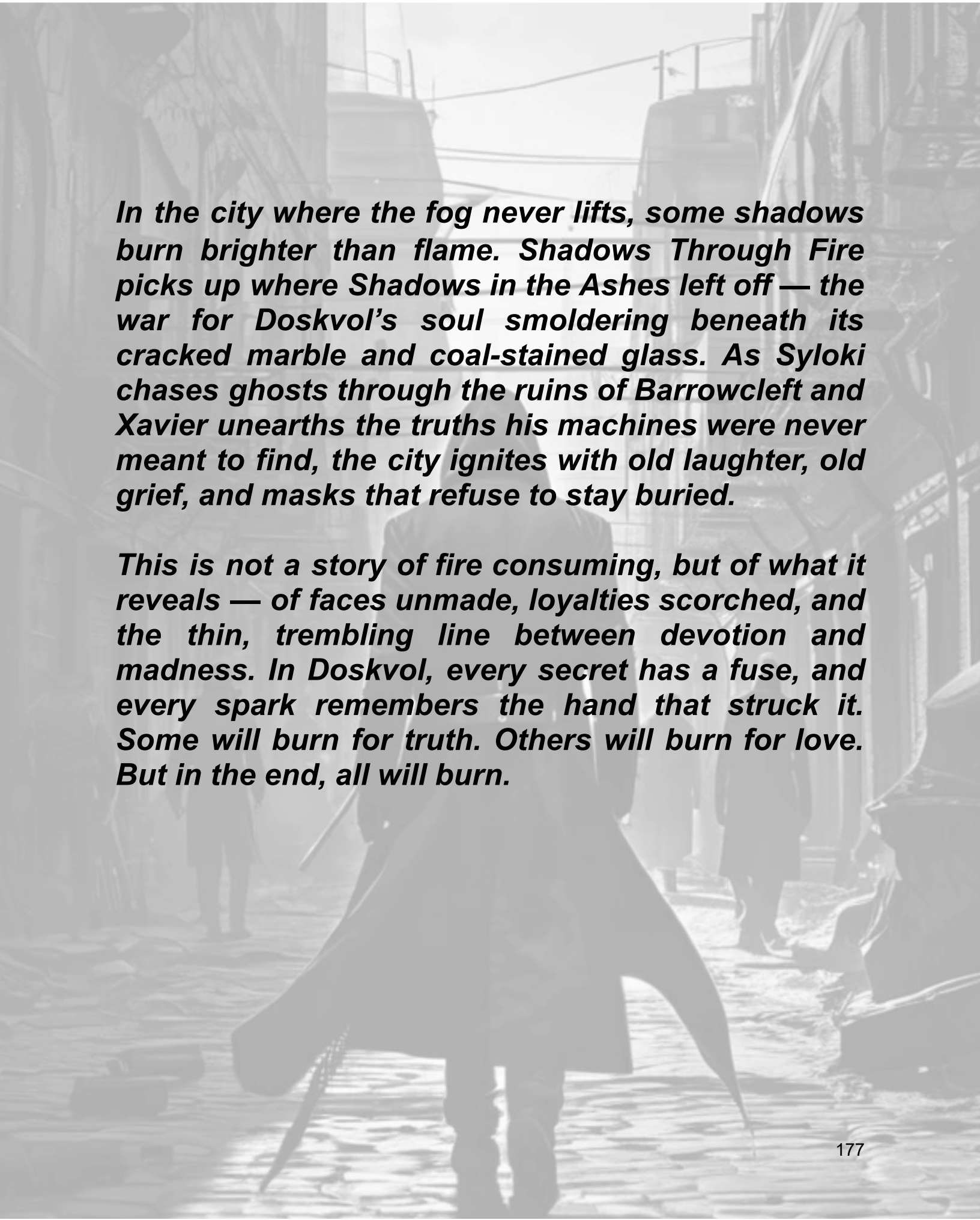
Arthur Xavier returns to Lannic with proof that Merrow's madness has begun twisting Doskvol's myths into reality. Defying orders, he ventures alone into the ruined amusement park of Barrowcleft, uncovering a nest of horror and chaos. In a brutal fight with Mitchell Marlowe amid fire, glass, and ghosts, Arthur barely survives—marking the beginning of a darker war yet to come.

Story: Lord Veylock and Morten Discuss the News

In the quiet of his study, Lord Veylock and his servant Morten dissect the shocking news of the Assumption Church attack. Their conversation turns from the Crows' rising reputation to the looming political ascent of Captain Morian Ishtar.

Chapter 10: Laughter in the Veins

Following whispers of a long-dead mask maker, Syloki descends into a forgotten open-air theater where laughter once burned to ash. What begins as a search for truth becomes a confrontation with ghosts, memory, and the fire that still haunts Barrowcleft.



In the city where the fog never lifts, some shadows burn brighter than flame. Shadows Through Fire picks up where Shadows in the Ashes left off — the war for Doskvol's soul smoldering beneath its cracked marble and coal-stained glass. As Syloki chases ghosts through the ruins of Barrowcleft and Xavier unearths the truths his machines were never meant to find, the city ignites with old laughter, old grief, and masks that refuse to stay buried.

This is not a story of fire consuming, but of what it reveals — of faces unmade, loyalties scorched, and the thin, trembling line between devotion and madness. In Doskvol, every secret has a fuse, and every spark remembers the hand that struck it. Some will burn for truth. Others will burn for love. But in the end, all will burn.